25c

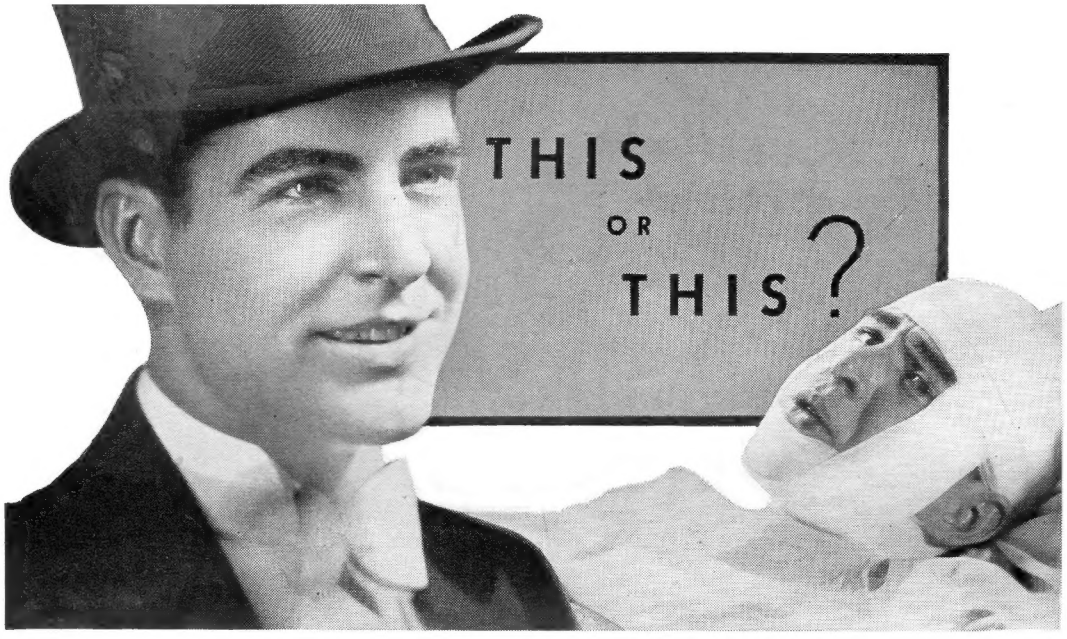
October 1st

Adventure

Published Twice A Month

TALBOT MUNDY · GEORGES SURDEZ · W. C. TUTTLE

CHARLES L. CLIFFORD · L. PATRICK GREENE ***and others***



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Address.....

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Ed snickered.

"Won't it be grand!" he grinned. "Now he can quit punching time-clocks and eating 40-cent lunches." He raised his voice. "Drop me a postal sometime when you get out into big business and start making $10,000 a year, will you, Frank?"

They both laughed uproariously. And probably it did seem like a joke to them that a $30 a week clerk would have the nerve to think he could ever get anywhere or make real money without some special "gift" or "pull."

But they laughed too soon. Just yesterday I sat down and wrote to Ed who is still at the shop, dragging along at the same old job.

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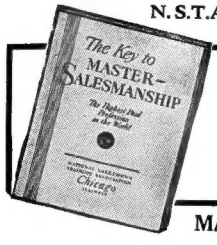
National Salesmen's Training Association

N.S.T.A. Bldg. Dept. R-1084 Chicago, Ill.



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A Story of Mysterious India

The BABU

By TALBOT MUNDY

LARRY O'HARA swung into the saddle, laughed, waved his hand and rode away into the dusty wind that had picked up bugle music on its way from the Khyber Pass. He sat his ramping red horse with a finality as reckless and contagious as his smile—as satisfying as the hollow between his shoulder-blades.

"What have I done, that a man like that should love me?"

Phœbe Barron watched him canter through the gate of the hotel compound and then settled down into a wicker chair to think things over, gazing at the skyline where the mountains bred those long nosed Hillmen whom it was Larry's job to understand and keep on terms with if he could. He had not told her where he was going, and she had not asked. She supposed she would have to grow accustomed to secrets that she must not try to learn; officers of the intelligence department are not allowed to share their information even with their wives.

There was a fat Bengali *babu* standing at the far end of the veranda, watching her. She had seen Larry speak to him,

not as officer to servant but as man to man, and just before Larry rode away he and the *babu* had exchanged signals. The *babu* saw her glance at him, and drew near. He was an enormous man dressed in a flame colored turban, dark European jacket, white sweater and flannel pants. He looked clean, as well as handsome in a middle aged, portly, elephantine way. There was humor in his brown eyes. Was he laughing at her?

"Salaam, sahiba. This *babu* proposes to ingratiate himself."

"Why? What for?"

"General principles. I know on which side of a slice of bread the butter tastes best, even when there is no butter, as usual. Am observant—see you have made conquest. Captain young redheaded Larry O'Hara sahib is my one and only ewe lamb. He is my broth of a boy. He is the only genuinely mischievous and wise young laughter maker between Delhi and the Karakorum Mountains. Since you have ensnaffled him—"

"That's impudent!"

"Sahiba, this *babu* has nothing else to sell but impudence. Same is not like soup in tin cans that purchaser will open next week and a long way off. Nobody buys impudence without first sampling same. It must be good—like Einstein thumbing nose at Euclid—or like Captain young O'Hara sahib putting kibosh on the Orakzai Pathans. I bet you don't know what a flaming young daredevil of a cock-robin Solomon with spurs on his bare heels and fun in his eye you have chosen for yourself to marry."

"Sit down then and tell me."

A wicker chair squeaked under his enormous weight. For a moment he sat with his hands on his thighs and studied her. His beautiful brown eyes were as full of understanding and humor as his metaphors were eloquent and mixed.

"Passport clerk informs me," he said suddenly, "that you are twenty-eight years old, unmarried, a nurse by profession, a citizen of U. S. A. United States, in India for purposes of travel. Travel is cost-plus curiosity, including ticket paid for in advance. Self seek position of plus."

"Plus what?"

"Am cosmic gigolo. Can jiggle hot time out of iceberg. Am charter member of Rogues' Racket Club, that has no dues and only one rule, that there are none."

"You admit you're a rogue?"

"May as well. You would find it out sooner or later. Once was honest *babu*, but there was too much competition."

Phœbe chuckled. She began to like the man.

"Go on," she said. "You were going to tell me about Captain O'Hara."

"Ladies first, sahiba. Preliminary *verb. saps.* given away gratis, same as fancy blotters by insurance agents. Am character diagnostician."

"What do you know about me?"

"Plenty. Am portable radio set. I bought myself on the instalment plan—a catastrophe down, and one mistake a day for forty years. Expensive, and a fat thing, but mine own. I know you nursed a millionaire through typhoid, and I know now why he fell in love. But what I want to know is why you upsnooted fifty million dollars? Self was in Chicago—twice. You could have married him and cashed in alimony."

"I don't do that kind of thing," said Phœbe.

"But you let him send you on this trip around the world?"

"Why not? He was grateful. He could afford to be generous; and I wanted to see the world. But how did you know? You must have been talking to Captain O'Hara."

"No use talking to him. I am redhead Larry's uncle, teacher, guide, philosopher, factotum, goat, admonisher and only maiden aunt. He gets himself in trouble, and I get him out again. Chullunder Ghose is my name. He would probably admit that I have taught him all he knows, including how to judge a woman. Nevertheless, I warn him and he does the opposite. But he is Irish. That is to say, he is inconsistent. When

I warn him against what I want him to do, he doesn't do it. Contrariwise, to show how undependable he is, I warned him against you as being much too good for him, so he goes after you like a cavalry charge, and now what? I have two of you to teach instead of one!"

"What do you propose to teach me?"

"Something that redhead young Captain Larry O'hot-stuff Hara will never learn, namely: That before he can teach his grandmother, meaning this *babu,* to suck eggs he must first know a good egg from a bad one; because a bad egg will never be good, though he suck like two elephants at one waterhole. Self am good egg, and he knows it. I have told him that Milk of the Moon is a bad egg. Nevertheless, he trusts her."

"Her? Who is she?"

"Jolly well who is she not? She is the Queen of Jezebels. She is the woman whom the Orakzai Pathans fight duels for. She knows all their secrets, including those which she has not yet told them. She is the night light naughty lady of Peshawar, who has caused more lovers to be killed with knives than Samson ever slew with an ass's jawbone. Redhead Larry has gone to see her. I have taught him how to disguise himself, and he can speak the language almost perfectly; but she knows who he is. And she jolly well understands that if a British officer were to be scuppered in her den, the authorities could neither punish her nor do much else about it. Because he would be out of bounds."

"Why has he gone to see her?" Phœbe asked. "And why do you tell this to me?"

"He has gone to see Milk of the Moon because, just now, it happens Akbar Sayyid is her lover. Akbar Sayyid is the Orakzai Pathan who leads raids hereabouts. He is as evasive as a jackal and there is a reward of ten thousand rupees on his head. Last night he led a raid along a bank of mist, slew six or seven sentries, stole a stand of rifles, and escaped. Redhead hopes to catch him. But I think Akbar Sayyid will catch Captain hurry-up O'Hara this time."

"Then why don't you do something about it? Go to his general and—"

HE INTERRUPTED her. "Sahiba, probably you know a lot about wounds and how to bandage them. But you don't know generals—or him, yet. I bet you. This business of marrying an Irish soldier's son, whose great grandfather fought at Waterloo, and whose grandfather rode through the guns at Delhi Ridge, is not so simple as it looks. Whoever is to be the guide, philosopher and friend of Captain catch 'em alive-O'Larry must have a light hand on the rein, plus twice the courage of a tiger, plus the confidence of a mother for her child and the resourcefulness of a magician, let me tell you! Some day he will come home feet first. But he will bring the bacon with him. And his widow will be able to say she loved a first class man."

Phœbe stood up and stared at the faraway mountains, thinking.

"Gray eyes!" said the *babu.* "Mouth like mother of successful sons I would bet, if I had any money!"

"Bet what?"

"I can teach you how to make him into a brass hat general in no time. But you must let him take some lickings before you can show him how to win."

"You seem to think you know a lot."

"*Verb. sap!* Am cynic, with idealistic leanings. Am immoralist, with snappy set of altruisms all my own, original with me. Am abstract pessimist, so concrete in my optimism that I hope he comes a cropper this time, so that you may unscramble the omelet. If not, we must wait until next time. For the present—silence!"

"You make me feel like screaming."

"That is doubtless why you do not scream. You are the kind that thrives on danger. So if hothead young O'Hara gets into a mess, this *babu* will depend on you to get him out of it. Meanwhile, my salaams, sahiba. May I offer you my card?"

It was a small one, as neat as a cabinet minister's, on which was engraved, "Babu Chullunder Ghose. F.B.A."

"F. B. A?" she asked.

"Failed Bachelor of Arts, Calcutta University. Too much knowledge. Ignorant examiners expected me to tell them what they thought they knew, instead of what I did know. Unlike O'Hothead Hara and yourself, they were not curious. So I have been forced to live by my wits instead of on my reputation. Wits must go to work this minute—good-by."

He was astonishingly agile, though he looked as if he weighed three hundred pounds. He vaulted the veranda railing and rode away on a bicycle. He looked so funny on it that Phœbe laughed in spite of her emotions, and liked him in spite of his impudence.

What could his object be in scaring her about Larry? Milk of the Moon sounded like a trade name for magnesia. She did not believe a word of that story.

Nevertheless, she was worried. She knew, of course, that secret service was Larry's idea of real life. She rather disapproved. She would have preferred him to lead squadrons. Somehow the thought of the man one loves being killed in the fighting line is half endurable. But in secret—nobody knowing how or why—no trumpet calls, no comrades, no renown, no citations . . .

"Not so good," thought Phœbe.

She forced herself to go and play tennis. And during an interval between sets she talked with a young officer who was just out of hospital and who did not know she was engaged to Larry. He was no help.

"Pathans? Savages. First class savages. Their women are even worse. A Pathan woman is more treacherous than the worst snake you ever heard of. Do I know Chullunder Ghose? Yes. Rotten liar. Don't have anything to do with him; he's one of those rascally *babus* who knows more than is good for him or anybody else."

Phœbe ventured cautiously beyond the border of discretion, and then wished she had not.

"Captain O'Hara? Splendid fellow, crazy as a March hare. Corking good company. Rides like the devil, and might make the all-India polo team if he had ambition. But he wastes his time learning languages that he'll forget if he ever lives long enough to command a regiment. What he'll get is a knife in the liver one of these days—same as I did, only a Hillman missed my liver, thank the Lord. O'Hara probably will get his from a woman in some mean dive in Peshawar bazaar. Those places fascinate him."

PHŒBE dined alone that night, in the tawdry hotel dining room, at a table between the fly blown portraits of the king and queen. She hated both of them. To her, just then, although she knew the suggestion was silly and told herself so, they were the Molochs for whom gallant young officers sacrificed themselves on the knives of savages. When she could not endure the portraits any longer she went to her own room, avoiding a game of bridge by saying she intended to write letters.

Perhaps she did intend that. If so, she forgot it. She sat still, miserable, lonely, seeing Larry's laughing, sunburned face—and then imagined him lifeless, looking upward at the dark sky. She could almost see the long knife plunged into that hollow between his reckless shoulderblades. She sat quite still until nearly ten o'clock, trying to force herself to see him whole and well. It was her creed, that thought, held strongly, takes form sooner or later, although she knew there was something inconsistent about that, because—for instance—

She had always disliked Irishmen, sworn she would never marry one. In a railway accident, some years ago, an Irish doctor told her she did not know her business. A professional nurse, on a train, without a first aid outfit in her

handbag! She had vowed she would never forgive the Irish for that insult. But she had never since then traveled five miles without two or three times more bandages and dressings, even instruments and antiseptics, than an Irishman at his peak of unreason could dream of asking for.

"Perhaps prejudice isn't thought. If it is, I take it back. I do love an Irishman. And if he loves the secret service, I will love that too. His friends shall be my friends—his enemies my enemies."

She decided she would go and play bridge, or at least look on at it, to keep from worrying. There were usually people in the lobby until after midnight; there might be three playing dummy, who would be glad of a fourth. But when she reached the lobby there was no one there. She turned over the pages of a stale magazine and suddenly remembered she had left her door unlocked, so she called one of the hotel servants and told him to lock it and bring her the key. The man was gone a long time. She went to look for him and met him coming along the corridor. He gave her the key and explained he had had to hunt for it; he said he found it at last on the dressing table. She gave him a small tip and returned to the lobby.

Outside, under the lamp on the veranda, stood Chullunder Ghose. He beckoned to her, but she hesitated, remembering what that officer had said of him. However, curiosity was too strong, so she went outside and followed him to the far end of the veranda. He was out of breath, and there was something so mysterious about his manner that her heart thumped and she dreaded bad news so that she could not force herself to speak. But his first words reassured her, and her relief was so great that she smiled and left off shuddering at the chilly night air.

"Sahiba, I come from O'Hara sahib. Thinking you would like to see the night life of Peshawar, he has sent an escort for you. Do you see that man with a lantern just outside the hotel gate? Follow him to a pony. Mount the pony and let him lead it. But keep silence. Mind now, not a word to any one!"

"I must go to my room for a wrap."

"The man has a cap and overcoat. You are to wear those. They are Captain O'Hara's."

She was suspicious. A note in Larry's writing would have been the proper thing; and why did the *babu* not want her to go to her room? But perhaps Larry had had no writing materials. At any rate, she decided she might need more money so she went to her room in spite of the *babu's* protests; and through habit, as she tucked some paper money into her stocking, made her glance toward the table where the handbag always stood ready against emergency. The bag was gone.

The hotel servant might have stolen it. She went to look for him. But he, too, was missing; he had gone off duty, and another had taken his place who answered her questions with blank bewilderment. And outside, the veranda almost hummed with the impatience of Chullunder Ghose. She decided to let the bag go hang and to row the hotel people about it afterward.

"Bohut atcha!" said the *babu*. "That means 'attaboy!' in Hindustani. "Come on!"

He led her to the compound gate, almost running ahead of her, glancing nervously to right and left when he reached the road. Then he snatched a military cap and overcoat from the man with the lantern and helped Phœbe into them. The cap was at least a size too large. She had not thought Larry O'Hara's head was as big as that; but when she pulled the cap off and held it toward the lantern she could see his name, in his own writing, on the inside leather band. That gave her all the confidence she needed.

"Hurry, sahiba! Hurry!"

"Where will you be?"

"Omnipresent! Ixion—god on bicycle!"

He vanished into shadow, but a mo-

ment later she heard a thump as he set down his wheels in the dust, and a squeak as he mounted. Then he sped past, almost silent, with his light out, and was gone.

So she followed the man with the lantern, doing her best to stride like a British officer and laughing at herself because she knew the attempt was a failure, although the ample folds of the overcoat concealed the outline of her hips, and nobody could see her clearly. It was pitch dark, lonely—no moonlight.

She began to be scared then. Stars shone, but there was a bank of utter black where mountains crowded the horizon. Jackals whimpered. Now and then a dog barked. Lights—lights—lights, but not one that looked friendly. Shadowy graveyards. A few figures—thieves? Pathan robbers? Perhaps servants slinking homeward. It reminded her of district nursing in the shanty towns, and that put heart in her. Nobody molests a nurse. She forgot she was not dressed as one.

SOMETHING moved within the shadow of a wall, and she saw the pony within ten paces of her, standing with one hip up and its nose to the dust. The man with the lantern unhitched the pony and then held the stirrup and helped her to mount. He wore a turban, a sheepskin jacket and very voluminous trousers. He smelled like a camel. She was glad when he gave her the reins and walked ahead. The pony followed, and she tried to ride as if used to it, rather thankful that the overcoat covered her legs. With the cap pressed low, and the overcoat collar turned up, she felt confident she would not be recognized.

She was startled several times by sentries. Their challenges in the darkness sounded like sudden curses. But her guide answered in a high pitched voice and all she had to do about it was to raise her hand in answer to the salute. She began to enjoy it—lighted a cigaret from Larry's case that she found in the overcoat pocket. It was good of Larry to invite her for such an adventure. Hot headed? Maybe. But considerate. And he trusted her not to act up like a silly fool and give the game away.

As they approached the native quarter, instead of sentries there were military police—big, bearded, turbaned men who stared hard but said nothing. She had heard that the bazaar was dangerous at night, and even out of bounds; but she was never once out of sight of a native policeman, and never once in total darkness in the winding streets, until the guide led down an alley and they reached a high wall that cast a deep shadow. Then a whistle, a long way behind her, blew shrilly. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the policeman at the cross street hurry out of sight.

She almost screamed then. Arms out of the darkness seized her. She was lifted out of the saddle, toward where the shadow was deepest. Some one in an overcoat exactly like hers, and with a cap like hers, sprang on the pony's back. The guide walked on, and the pony followed him exactly as if nothing had happened. Strong hands gripped her elbows. A gate opened; she was pushed through, and it closed behind her. Then she recognized the *babu's* voice as he released her arms:

"You will be mother of gray eyed sons, who will also not need to be gagged to prevent them from making a fuss!"

"Aren't you ashamed?" she retorted, turning on him.

"No. Would be ashamed if I had guessed wrong, like damn fool police who heard whistle and ran looking for murder! So you get in unseen. Do you feel offended?"

As a matter of astonishing fact, she did not. She felt excited and intensely curious. She could hear a drumbeat and something like cymbals, muffled by intervening walls.

"This is dairy of Milk of the Moon," said the *babu.* "When you enter, be what U.S.A. Americans call snooty. Otherwise there might be fly in amber of our cheerio-ishness."

Strong smells—heavy footed silence, due to deep dust. She was surprised how confident she felt, with the palm of Chullunder Ghose's hand shoving her forward into darkness that was broken only by one keyhole. Light poured through that. The *babu* kicked at the door. It opened gingerly. He kicked again, so fiercely that it slammed the face of the man who lurked behind it, making him swear and hiss like a scalded cat.

The *babu* pushed Phœbe through the door into a dim, square vestibule and the door slammed shut.

Dimness—and she began to be thoroughly scared now. Four men sat on mats against a wall, with swords beside them—fierce fellows—one with a wound and a blood stained bandage. They lowered their eyes when Phœbe stared at them, but an impression stole on her that the *babu* was as frightened as herself.

Sounds and strange smells—musk and something else—barbaric music, muted by an intervening door. She turned to Chullunder Ghose.

"Where is Captain O'Hara?" she asked calmly.

Instead of answering, the *babu* opened the door and pushed her into colored, smoky lamplight.

"Pathan night club," he whispered. "No cover charge, but watch your hat and overcoat, as they say in U.S.A. United States!"

Silence then, as sudden as an explosion. Two young women in silk trousers and jackets, each with a big turquoise on her naked stomach, stood in midroom as if frozen in the act of dancing. Phœbe had not dreamed there were such women in India—intelligent looking and beautiful, almost as white as herself. They were not afraid; they were astounded that she should dare to come among them.

Chullunder Ghose helped off her overcoat and whispered:

"Cap, too. Let them see your gray eyes."

TEN or eleven men lay sprawling on cushioned seats around the walls, some smoking pipes that had a strange, faint smell in addition to that of tobacco. Hasheesh? Oiled lovelocks fell below their turbans. They had prominent noses and rather sly, but pleasant looking, quarrelsome, bold eyes. Even the older ones wore roses tucked behind their ears. Some of them had swords, and all had daggers in jeweled sheaths that looked like heirlooms.

"Pathans," the *babu* whispered. "Damn good bad men. Upsnoot them before they think you are afraid!"

It is not simple to upsnoot people who have not yet offered insolence. Phœbe stood still.

"Where is Captain O'Hara?" she demanded.

"In a moment. In a moment," said the *babu*. He was either disguising excitement, or else terrified; Phœbe thought she felt him tremble when his elbow touched her.

Some one drew a curtain with a clash of brass rings. Seven or eight girls, even better looking than the first two, clustered in the doorway of an inner room and stared at her with bold, astonished eyes. There was an amber light behind them; crimson, yellow and green jackets and trousers looked like colors from another universe. Their skin glowed like satin. They were healthier looking than the men.

"Is Captain O'Hara in there?"

Before the *babu* could answer, the girls stirred and a woman walked out from behind them. She was wonderful in curve, line, movement, and she knew it. If the diamonds at her ears were prodigal, so was the way she traded on audacity. There was something cruel in her beauty, and her smile was as full of mischief as the subtle fingertips that almost imperceptibly began the snake wave motion from which genuine dance emerges.

"Milk of the Moon!" Chullunder Ghose announced.

The woman knew English—laughed.

"My name sounds strange in that tongue. Is this she of whom you spoke?"

"I am Phœbe Barron."

Challenge—eyes to eyes—each woman weighing and appraising the other with wisdom won from life, though differently won. Character met character, and will met will. The men watched. Suddenly Milk of the Moon, as the *babu* called her, laughed with a note in her voice like the clashing of anklets.

Not a man moved. Milk of the Moon made a gesture with her palm turned upward. One of the girls brought rosebuds woven into one long necklace and Milk of the Moon tossed it over Phœbe's shoulders.

"May the Prophet love you! Are you not afraid?"

"I have come to find Captain O'Hara. What should I fear?"

But she was deathly afraid. There was a creepy feeling up her spine, as if unseen knives were being whetted for her.

"Look into her eyes. She is afraid of nothing—except that she might fail her lover," said the *babu.*

Milk of the Moon glanced sidewise at the men. Her eyes and her smile grew cruel, and Phœbe knew now, knew beyond the slightest shade of doubt that Larry lay at death's door. She could not have told how she knew it, but her own eyes changed so that Milk of the Moon retreated from her half a step—then forward again, to assert her own spirit. She spoke slowly—

"If you are one who leaks tales, like a roof that drips—"

"I am not," said Phœbe. "Where is Captain O'Hara?"

Milk of the Moon glanced again at the men, and the girls grinned.

"You, and he, and this *babu,* who is a sack of trash without a buyer, die this night, unless—"

Larry O'Hara was still alive then! Phœbe's voice was as quick as a champion's blow in the ring. She was ready for anything.

"Unless what?"

"Come on!" said the *babu.* "This way. *Jaldee—jaldee!* That means, 'Step on it!' "

He hustled her toward a stair between beaded curtains, then led because there was only room for one at a time. In darkness, all the way up the winding stairs, Phœbe heard the clash of Milk of the Moon's anklets. Then there was dim light at the stairhead as the *babu* stumbled over something and opened a door.

"Here it is—your bag. I took it from your room. I brought it on my bicycle. It is locked—no key—I have a knife—if there are not the right things in it—"

He went down on his knees on a sheepskin mat and began slashing at the leather with a clasp knife. Milk of the Moon pushed Phœbe forward toward an inner door. It was open.

"O my God!"

Larry O'Hara lay still, on a wide cot, with a naked candle throwing shadows all around him. There was blood on the floor. He was pale—not yet dead, though; she could see him breathing.

"Bag is open," said the *babu.* "Shall I empty it on table?"

"Bring a doctor, you idiot!" Phœbe took Larry O'Hara's wrist and felt his pulse. "Do you hear me? Hurry!"

"And get us all killed? Krishna! Why did I bring you—and your bag?"

Milk of the Moon spoke—

"Do you know a doctor who would not tell tales?"

Then Phœbe's veins unfroze. She pulled her armor on, an apron from the bag.

"Out of my way! Water—lots of it—and hurry!"

SHE herself dragged the table nearer, took scissors and cut the clumsy, blood soaked bandage with which some one had tried to stanch a knife wound below Larry's ribs. Milk of the Moon watched her, fascinated by the skill of fingers that had broken rules many a time and done surgeon's work before the surgeon came.

Phœbe was aware of nothing but the job she had to do, conscious of nothing but Larry, his wound and her own trained capability. She worked. She heard nothing, not even a man's voice and his heavy footsteps. She spoke at last, believing that the man behind her was the *babu:*

"Bled like veal, but I've stopped it, and the wound is nothing to write home about. I think it's clean. He ought to get well in a week or two." Then, facing about, "Who knifed him?"

A man grinned at her, his yellow teeth sharp like a wolf's in a gap of his black beard. He wore a smelly sheepskin jacket, a revolver, two knives. He was tall, and the thews of his throat were like whipcord. He had a hooked nose and the eyes of an eagle. He stood boldly, but his grin was cunning; and his lower lip, protruding, indicated greed that overruled all other considerations. In a voice that resembled knife blades grating on each other he said something in a language of which Phœbe knew not one word.

Milk of the Moon interpreted. She stood beside the man, but enough behind him not to seem too confident. Her mood had changed.

"This is Akbar Sayyid—he whom men obey along this border."

Phœbe stared.

"Did he knife Captain O'Hara?"

"Nay. If he did there would be no life left. Akbar Sayyid stabs straight."

"What does he want?" Phœbe demanded.

"He will take. You and that one and the *babu* are his prisoners."

"Why?" Sharp as a pistol shot. She had won the first round. She was ready for the next now. "Why?" she repeated.

"Because that officer O'Hara came to my house to catch Akbar Sayyid. In disguise he came, full of fair speech, I permitting it because that *babu* told me there will be good ransom money if Akbar Sayyid captures him alive. But—"

Chullunder Ghose made signals. He was standing by a small square window with his big head silhouetted against starlight. Phœbe glanced once and then ignored him. Blackguard! Liar! Betraying Larry—then herself—and daring to make signals.

"But a young fool of the Orakzai Pathans," Milk of the Moon continued, "saw through his disguise, and drew a knife too swiftly. Thus this shambles, in my house, that the police already spy on too much. And so you, and he, and that *babu* are to be taken away swiftly. The Pathans downstairs will carry him. And if he dies—"

"He will be dead then," the *babu* interrupted. He came nearer. "Ask Akbar Sayyid who buys dead men, and for how much?"

Milk of the Moon turned on him and answered in her own language, but glanced at the door as if some one might be listening and began her speech again in English.

"But I tell you he was searched. There was no letter in his clothing such as airmen carry. For an airman alive there is a reward, and all men know that they need only to present the letter and deliver up the airman to get the reward. But this is not an airman. This one must be held until there has been much talk and the money is sent for his ransom."

"If they carry him far, he will bleed to death." Phœbe interrupted. "Tell that gangster to take me instead."

"Gangster? What is it?" Milk of the Moon detected insult.

So did Akbar Sayyid, who appeared to know at least some English. His *izzat,* as the Pathans call honor, was touchy. His eyes looked as if they would strike sparks on steel. No mere woman had the right to call him strange names.

Chullunder Ghose came waddling into that breach—blocked it with his huge bulk, forcing all attention to himself.

"Why did I go for his overcoat?" he demanded. "Why did I pedal my way to his bungalow and kick his servant in the stomach? Did I run that risk for nothing, with half the dogs in the cantonment after me?" He flourished the

overcoat Phœbe had worn. He stuck his hand into the inside pocket. "There—look—see!" He produced an envelop marked O.H.M.S, opened the envelop, flourished its contents. "Can you read? His name, his rank, his photograph! And beneath that, what? In his language, and in yours also—read it—read it! 'A reward of ten thousand rupees will be paid for the bearer to whoever befriends him if captured while on active duty, and returns him alive and not ill treated to the army headquarters, Peshawar.' Ten thousand rupees!"

Money is money. Akbar Sayyid's eyes shone flinty in the draft blown candlelight. Larry O'Hara stirred and Phœbe stooped over the pillow, laying a cool hand on his forehead. Akbar Sayyid spoke through set teeth, in his own tongue. Milk of the Moon answered him in English, glancing again at the door, fearing listeners.

"True, there is a reward on your head, Akbar Sayyid. But what of it? Who knows you by sight?"

"She—that woman—she would tell," he answered, the first English words he had uttered; he spoke them slowly and then laughed self-consciously, as if ashamed of using unbeliever's language. Then he muttered something about Allah, perhaps with the notion of cleansing his mouth.

Milk of the Moon clutched Phœbe by the elbow, shook her, and spoke as if words were knives that cut deep:

"You—is that your man? You want him? Can you lie? Will you lie for his life?"

Chullunder Ghose came to the rescue again; before Phœbe could answer.

"Listen, now. Listen, all of you, to what I tell him. Is he conscious?"

Phœbe nodded, and the *babu* leaned over the cot.

"O'Hara sahib, lie still. This has happened. You saw a raid by Pathans. You followed those Pathans. You hoped to capture one, who might betray the others. You were stabbed—you don't remember where. You were found by friendly Orakzai Pathans, who carried you to this house, fearing you might die if carried farther. This *babu*, in quest of personal amusement, found you, ran in search of doctor, met Miss Barron on her way home from a dinner party. Brought her to you, and she dressed your wound. Now you shall be carried; and he who commands your bearers is to have the reward for finding you wounded and bringing you in. Do you understand that?"

Larry O'Hara nodded. He was recovering swiftly, even for an Irishman in the pink of condition. Phœbe cautioned him to lie still, and the *babu* faced his audience with his fists clenched; but Phœbe thought she saw cunning beneath the excitement. She did not trust him. She swore she would never again trust any *babu*.

"Do you all understand?" he demanded.

"But his clothes?" said Akbar Sayyid, mouthing the words as he ran strong fingers through his beard.

The *babu* answered, taking charge, sheer will power overcoming the Pathan's irresolution.

"If he were stabbed in the open, would they not have stripped him? You will say you found his overcoat a hundred paces distant, dropped by some thief as he ran. And you—it was beneath your dignity to steal an overcoat. You covered his naked body with it. And in the pocket of the coat you found that paper promising reward. What are we waiting for?" He seized Milk of the Moon by the arm. "You, make him promise me a present when he gets ten thousand rupees!"

Milk of the Moon said something in a low voice. Akbar Sayyid nodded. Phœbe swore to herself again that she would never trust a *babu*. A commission on blood money!

Milk of the Moon began to speak, but the *babu* again interrupted, gesturing at Akbar Sayyid.

"Has he lost his cunning, and his courage? Bid him tell those Orakzai

Pathans to make a stretcher of a table top and roof poles! Bid him command silence until after they hear the tale that he tells; otherwise each fool will tell a different story. Send him downstairs. Have you lost your power to make men listen to you?"

MILK OF THE MOON proved then that Delilah was no more than an amateur. She wasted few words; those she did use sounded like crystallized music. An expression stole over her face that suggested Salome wheedling John the Baptist's head from Herod. Gesture, subtlety of movement—an imponderable concentration, more deliberate but far less obvious than a cat's, all wove themselves together into fascination and appealed to Akbar Sayyid's cunning, that to every savage stands in place of wisdom.

She made no love to him. She suggested love is only won by lending ear to wisdom on the lips of woman. And to Akbar Sayyid, with her perfume and her smiling eyes, that moment she was all the woman in the world. He let her lead him to the stairhead, nodding as she whispered.

"Learn that!" said the *babu*. "That is hot stuff. But employ it only in emergency, and for another purpose!"

Phœbe hardly heard him. She was down on her knees by the cot, because Larry O'Hara stirred and seemed to want to speak to her. With her ear to his lips she could hardly catch the faint words—

"Obey the *babu!*"

Then he lapsed into unconsciousness again, or seemed to. But his pulse was gaining.

Milk of the Moon came back from the head of the stairs. Chullunder Ghose met her midway and gave her no chance to say what she had in her mind. He seized her elbow.

"Take this whistle. Send a man you can trust to the end of the Street of the Blacksmiths. There he is to blow the whistle three times, so that the police will think there is a murder and will run toward the sound. Thus no police will see us when we carry this man out into the street. Then bring your girls up here to lift O'Hara sahib very gently on a sheet and carry him downstairs to the litter. And tell Akbar Sayyid he should shoulder one pole of the litter himself, to avoid suspicion and to make his story seem more plausible."

He pushed her to the stairhead. He seemed able to force some people to obey him.

"Next time, Hurry-up young hothead chuck-a-luck O'Hara possibly will listen to me when I tell him how many beans make five," he remarked. But Phœbe took no notice. Larry's eyes were open. He had heard; he understood; he even smiled at what the *babu* said.

It was only a few moments before the women came, to gather up the sheet with women's skill and lay O'Hara on the litter in the room downstairs. Then, almost before eight Orakzai Pathans had finished arguing about who should shoulder which pole, three shrill blasts from a whistle split the night. The *babu* led the way. They bore the litter out into the darkness, Akbar Sayyid shouldering the left hand forward pole and Phœbe following, wondering whether it is really true that the Indian sun and the Indian moon make people do things that nobody in his senses would even contemplate. It was like a dream—only that the stars were shining, and the smells, and the tramp of the Pathans' feet seemed real.

And then nightmare, sudden, unbelievable. Akbar Sayyid let go of the litter. A dozen uniformed policemen loomed out of the darkness. All the litter bearers let go. Phœbe caught Larry O'Hara in her arms and broke his fall to earth, but fell with him. Before Akbar Sayyid could draw dagger or revolver, Chullunder Ghose turned and had him down in the dust, with arms pinned to his sides. The Pathan fought like a trapped snake, but the *babu's* strength and weight crushed the breath out of him,

until he weakened, while the twelve policemen fought like grunting shadows with the seven litter bearers and Chull-under Ghose yelled to them—screeched—imprecated—bidding them come and get the right man, even if they had to let the others go.

Then Larry O'Hara, hugged in Phœbe's arms as she knelt beside him in the dust, found speech and strength. He bade a policeman help the *babu.* In a moment—less than a moment—three policemen pounced on Akbar Sayyid, took his weapons, trussed him, hands behind his back and feet tied like a chicken's in the market. The man whom the first policeman loosed in order to go to the *babu's* aid struck hard at Phœbe with a knife. He missed with the point, but the hilt and his fist half stunned her. She was lying beside Larry when the *babu* came, rubbing his own bruises, chuckling, stooping to grin in O'Hara's face.

"Got him, sahib! Akbar Sayyid is in irons. So are the others. Ambulance in half a minute." Then he grinned at Phœbe as he struck a match to see how badly she was hurt. His own face was a mass of bruises where the Pathan had butted him as they fought in the dust. "Bad *babu,* eh? Never trust him—no, no! All the same, sahiba, you have seen that this *babu* can follow where O'Hara sahib leads!"

"I beg your pardon," she said simply.

"Have forgiven—frequently—much snootier sahibas than your honorable self! My best salaams. But who is to forgive me? Milk of the Moon will claim and she will get the reward for the capture of Akbar Sayyid. They will hang him, so he doesn't matter. But his friends will blame Milk of the Moon, so she will accuse me and set them after me—which does not matter also, because I shall vamoose, scoot, vanish.

"Self am no use—nothing doing, until Larry O'Hotspur Hara gets well and we take the field again! But what will *he* say? I let him lie there after he was stabbed. I left him there as bait for Akbar Sayyid, while I bicycled and made a plan with the police, and fetched his overcoat, and brought you. We have to take long chances at our trade, sahiba. It was a case of finishing a job, at the risk—"

"Oh, go to hell!" O'Hara murmured. "Damn you, shake hands!"

A Novelette

of the

Mexican Border

The SECOND CHANCE

By CHARLES L. CLIFFORD

THERE was such a shortage of officers that Sergeant Piggot was given one of the smaller outpost stations. It was deadly in the way of loneliness and isolation, naturally. Young officers like to ride into town on a Saturday . . .

There had been a rough attempt to make the crumbling adobe buildings conform to the orderliness of a barracks. The sandy soil for yards around was swept meticulously bare each morning after breakfast. The walls had been knocked out of the longest building to make a stable for the troopers' mounts. A taut, efficient picket line had been raised under the roof that had been left. A saddle room had been improvised in one of the huts of the abandoned settlement. The neat line of field cots, with the equipment of their occupants perfectly arranged nearby, would have done credit to the honor squad room of the best regiment in the Army in some permanent post.

The men growled ferociously when Sergeant Piggot was not within hearing. Bad enough to be patrolling night and day in this Godforsaken place. The few minutes left you might be better spent than in policing a deserted village. Shine your shoes at night, and when you woke up at daylight they were covered with red sand. You hadn't even had them on. The same with your rifle and saber and pistol. Did he think he was running some pavement outfit, where all you did was drill an hour a day and the rest of the time look pretty? He even had a flag flying over the place and a private blowing calls by the bugle. Where the hell did he get off, anyway, trying to be commanding officer of a post?

The sun rose red, at full heat. The desert shimmered under its blasting rays as though seen through liquid, waved glass. Reveille had gone a full half hour. In their undershirts, breeches and leggings, the platoon went through its setting-up exercises in front of the barracks.

Sergeant Piggot, rifle in hands, set the time for their movements. He was a slim, wide shouldered man with beautifully turned legs. He swayed and reached and lunged in perfect cadence as he led the way through the manual.

The troopers kept pace with his movements, their faces set, their eyes bitter-bright. To a man, they hated Sergeant

Piggot. At that moment there was not one among them who would not be supremely happy if a Mexican sniper's bullet dropped him before their faces. They said that among themselves—and they firmly believed it.

The calisthenics over, the men walked languidly into the barracks to put on their shirts. Then a hurried breakfast —not too well prepared because Carney, the regular cook, had been caught in the mouth by a Mauser bullet from across the river a few days before. They snatched a smoke on the way to the picket line. Then—

"Stand to heel!"

That was Piggot—the so-and-so . . .

Piggot stood smoking a short briar pipe, watching the men groom. His cold, sharp eyes missed no single movement of the jerking hands. Relentlessly he cursed the laggards between the chants of the ritual of "stables".

"Near side—neck—flanks—back. Easy on those legs— Change! Neck—flanks —back . . .

Stifled oaths came from under the horses' bellies. Snarls passed between men close together.

"The so-and-so!" they said.

"Clean out nose and docks. Water!" came at last from Piggot.

They led the horses toward the river.

The Rio Grande was already warm under the sun. The few scattered cottonwoods along its banks stood still and lifeless in the withering heat. Across the river, on the Mexican side, the ground sloped, rocky and cactus pimpled, abruptly into a red wall of mountain. The other side was much the same. They might have been in a scourged valley of Mars, so desolate and depressing and lost to all signs of life was their habitat.

Three squads, a cook and a sergeant . . .

"First squad saddle up for patrol."

Corporal Breen used the same tone to his men without realizing it.

"Get going!"

Piggot turned to the other corporal, who was rubbing a white spot on his horse's back.

"Start them at close order drill," he said.

The corporal almost saluted.

"Yes, sir," he said, and could have bitten his tongue off. "Why, the lousy —" he muttered under his breath as he turned away.

Piggot regarded the first corporal with cold, business-like eyes.

"Send Mack downriver to relieve No. 1 patrol. You take the other half squad up and relieve No. 2."

Corporal Breen would be damned if *he* said "Yes, sir."

"O.K," he said.

Piggot regarded him steadily. The corporal shifted his broad toed shoes in the sand.

"What's that you said?" the sergeant asked quietly.

"Very good," Corporal Breen said.

"Don't forget it next time," Piggot said. "Too many men want stripes—"

The two half squads rode off in opposite directions, up and down the river. In course of time they would meet the patrols they were relieving. These would ride in, tired and ravenous, eat a belated breakfast, groom, and go through dismounted drill under Sergeant Piggot's watchful eye.

WHO ever heard of such a schedule? At the other Border outposts, drill for the men off patrol duty was more or less perfunctory. A few hours, maybe, in the morning. Just enough to keep smartness in the outfit. And there were tales about some of the lazier places where nothing was done in the way of scheduled drill. After a night and day of strenuous patrolling, the men were allowed to lie around and amuse themselves. And why not? Weren't these Cavalrymen of the Border old and seasoned soldiers?

Tales had got back to regimental headquarters, some miles up in the hills, about Piggot's outfit. Men had deserted and reported for duty at the main post. Others had never been heard of again. The colonel had frowned over several characteristic anonymous letters. One had read:

> . . . Sevril of us gotten together on riting this letter to the Conel. It ain't right the way this Sgt. Piggot goes on. He sent us on paroll day and night and then he work us at groomeing and fatige and at drill mtd. and dismt. for hours on end. No other place in the Army does you that way. I no they dont at the other stations on the Line. No officer wouldn't do soldiers that way so how come a Sgt. get off such stuff?
>
> We wouldnt dair put our names on this so the Colonel will excuse it please. We dont want to go over the Hill but we think we outo get a even break with the other men in this Regiment who get a rest once in a wile—

Things like that.

The colonel spoke to Sergeant Piggot the next time he inspected La Reina station. He took the sergeant aside, out of earshot of the men. Under pretense of inspecting the new picket line, he put some shrewd questions.

The sergeant looked him levelly in the eyes.

"I sent you a copy of my schedule, Colonel; and it was approved. I'm do-

ing the job as I think it should be done. This is the touchiest part of the river, they say. There's sniping from the other side almost every night."

The colonel looked uncomfortable under those steady blue eyes. He had known this man for five years now. In that time he had made the phenomenal rise from recruit to an exceptionally efficient sergeant. Almost unheard of in a good regiment of the old Army. And not once in all that time had a derogatory report been made about him.

The colonel cleared his throat. He was very uncomfortable, standing there. He knew that the eyes of many men were watching him covertly.

"Er—you might ease up a bit. Your schedule is a little—well, we might say, full, for men who do such rigorous patrolling."

The sergeant's lean jaw tightened. He said quietly—

"Is the Colonel dissatisfied with the way things have been going here?"

Confronted with the bald question the Old Man, noted for his soldierly directness, was on familiar ground.

"Sergeant," he said, "I'm going to speak frankly to you. You've served in my regiment five years now. Your record has been excellent. And you know my attitude toward discipline."

"I've tried to pattern after it, sir."

A quick gleam came into the old soldier's eyes. Martinet, they called him. He had nothing but contempt for the popularity boners who slighted discipline for the dubious reward of back slapping.

"I have just completed an inspection of all the outposts," the colonel said. "Yours is the only one commanded by a noncommissioned officer. The appearance of your men, the police and arrangement of your quarters and stables —everything that I have noticed here excels anything I have seen along the line. That's a high compliment to pay an enlisted man, Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir."

"Have you ever thought of going up for a commission, Piggot?"

The sergeant started as though caught off guard by some frightening thing. He made no attempt to answer for a moment. He looked along the picket line as though surprised suddenly by some discovered irregularity among the horses.

"I'd—rather not, sir."

The Old Man was genuinely startled. All along he had assumed that a man of Piggot's caliber was enlisted in the Army for one thing: a commission. You could pick them every time. Quiet fellows, who kept much to themselves. Reading, studying, working at night when the men left the barracks to its few hours of quietness. But there were others—men who had all the earmarks, but lacked the most important of all: ambition. They were a tight lipped sort, always. Heavy drinkers on paydays. Gentlemen, who had been bitter failures on the outside for one reason or another. So this Piggot—

"I'm sorry, Sergeant," was all the colonel found to say. He hated to say that. But he knew it was the only thing he could say. After all, command ceased when you began to touch a man's soul. He became brusk, entirely the commanding officer again. "The only thing," he said casually, "you might let up a bit. Not an order, you understand. I like your way of going about things, Piggot. A little more rest might help the morale. Think it over. I won't change a damned thing by order. You need another man, eh?"

PIGGOT felt a strange affinity for this hardened old soldier. A surge of loyalty arose in him. At that moment a thought came suddenly to him: Battle. Following this man through thin clouds of 'dobe dust. The horses beating the hard ground. Sabers flashing in the sun. The hoarse shouts of troopers—

"I need a cook, sir," he said.

"I've sent you a man," the colonel said. "Won't promise you he's a good one. Maybe a goldbrick. You know how things are now. But you should be

up to strength. I understand conditions here. Valdes is making trouble all along the line. The passes are at your back. The richest cattle lands in Texas. They've got to have the meat to take the field. Mexico is drained. I suppose a troop should be here. It's tough figuring it. I'm depending on you, Piggot. I've every confidence in you."

He stepped closer, laying a kindly hand on the sergeant's sleeve.

"I'm leaving. Got to get back to a damned mutual admiration society dinner at El Paso tonight. Got to make a speech. Remember, 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'. Get me?"

The sergeant swallowed. What a swell old guy!

"I get you, sir," he said.

When the dust clouds of the colonel's car had settled, the men, who had been assembled, shined and in their best, turned disgustedly back toward the barracks. Only two o'clock. That so-and-so would have them at it in a minute now. Drill all busted up. A couple of hours behind. Probably work until dark, now . . .

"That'll be all for the day," Piggot said.

He said it impulsively. The glow from the Old Man's words was still on him. A magnanimous glow. His understanding of soldiers was clouded momentarily by that glow. Normally, he would have anticipated their inevitable reaction.

The troopers dispersed, muttering. Time on their hands. They had long forgotten what to do with empty time. All dressed up, and no place to go. They were under no illusions as to the reason for this unheard of dispensation. No proper gesture of that high hat sergeant. No gracious corollary of the colonel's praise for their soldierly appearance. *They* knew. They'd seen that quiet talk by the picket line. The Old Man had given Mr. Piggot holy hell —but tomorrow he'd be at the old hazing game.

The men went to their bunks. They lay, languidly, stripped of their starched khaki. They blew Bull Durham smoke toward the tin roof. They talked little. The heat was stifling. Sticky flies clung to their wet skin. They hated this dump, and they hated Piggot—more now than ever because he had shown the mark of the sycophant.

Piggot had a small, separate room at one end of the building. It was a bare room. Nothing there but his field cot, foot locker and equipment. But there was blessed privacy. The first he had had since his enlistment.

He stretched out on his cot, moodily smoking a pipe. What the colonel had said had set him to thinking. Not about the platoon. But about himself. Go up for a commission. Alone there on his bunk, he laughed aloud. Bitterly, satirically.

Loud voices came from outside in the squad room. Argument. Curses. Piggot rose on his elbow and listened. A drunken voice . . . He sat up on the edge of the cot. He should have known it. Men in lonely places like this should be kept under discipline every moment. No play. No leisure.

Now he remembered that he had heard the sound of a car. He had been thinking back then—hadn't thought it odd in this jumping off place. He heard it now again, chugging away. The noise in the barracks room increased. The voice of Corporal Moylan came to him, authoritative, cursing methodically. Paddy was a true soldier. He knew Paddy hated him—they all did. But men of Paddy's stripe did their duty in spite of things like that.

Moylan appeared in the doorway. He was a blocky Irishman, with a keen eye, a shrewd red face. His likes and hates were fierce, and formed instantly. He had the courage and the quick power of a panther.

"What is it, Corporal?"

"I'd like to handle it myself," Moylan said quietly. His eyes blazed.

"How'd they get it in here? I've been over the place with a fine tooth comb."

"It's the new man from headquarters,

Sergeant. Sent to cook. Come over in a rancher's flivver from Valentine. Drunk and got a pint on him."

Only Piggot's eyes changed. They grew smaller and darker in his sun blackened face.

"Confine him. If he keeps up that racket, gag him. Use a grooming rag."

"I'll use me fist first," Moylan muttered, and he walked out.

The squad room quieted miraculously. Piggot relighted his pipe. He lay back against his coarse pillow, stained a yellowish brown by the sifting desert sands.

"I'll drive the tramp over the hill," he thought. "I've got these babies where I want them now. I won't have some goldbrick putting ideas into their heads."

He heard the slow hoof beat of a horse outside his little window. Well, the man who had tied that knot would be sorry. He rose from the bunk. He stood in the open door to the squad room.

"Whoever owns that horse, go get him!"

The men looked up. Their faces tightened. They looked at one another. One of them said sulkily:

"Ain't mine. I pulled my knot up tight."

"Get off those bunks! Damn it, do you even know the sounds of your own horses' feet?"

The men started to move. Some slowly. Some quickly—barefoot on the hot earthen floor. A man went to the door and stood staring.

"It's Hoffman," he said. "They shot hell outa him."

Hoffman staggered in unaided. The men stood looking stupidly at him.

"Who done it, Hoffman?"

"He was upriver with Breen."

"Who done it, Hoffman?"

Hoffman fell across the nearest cot.

"Get the aid kit, Fenner. You, Bernstein, hot water. Beat it now!"

Piggot bent over the man. He lifted him on to the bunk. His heavy, dust caked shoes flopped over sidewise.

"He's croaked a'ready."

"Get back to your bunks and shut up," Piggot said.

He tore the blood soaked shirt away.

"Breen ought to be tried for this," he muttered. "Sending a man in this condition in alone! Lift his head."

"Here," Moylan said. He pushed a pint bottle of whisky into Piggot's hand.

"Where'd you get that?" Piggot said. He looked hard at Moylan.

"Took it off that drunk cook," Moylan said, staring back hard.

"Oh . . . Well, we don't need it. We need an undertaker. Take him out to the icehouse. Easy, now—his own cot . . . "

They stood about the room in clumsy postures. No one said anything. They watched Piggot.

"WHAT you gonna do with that bottle?" Moylan asked softly.

Piggot walked to the door. He removed the cork of the whisky bottle. Deliberately he poured the wicked looking red stuff on to the sand. He tossed the empty bottle into a rubbish tin nearby. He turned and looked hard at Moylan.

"That," he said, and he walked back into his room, closing the door.

There was a dim lantern burning in the solid little 'dobe room used for a guardhouse cell. Piggot peered in through the barred window at the man lying there. His O.D. shirt was ripped open at the neck, showing a hairy throat. His creased face was gray from drunkenness. He snored as though he would die of the agony of it. As Piggot watched the man, his own face became dull and gray. There was a tightness in his throat. He worked his tongue over his desert cracked lips.

After all this time—the hell, the loneliness; the bitter praying for a break to prove himself . . .

Instantly his mind indicated a solution. The only one. It seemed the inevitable act. He had imagined this

thing happening to him for five long years. Those years seemed unnatural to him in the beginning because it hadn't happened. The fighting chance had spurred him on. The long odds. But mostly the vague hope men call hunch. Yes, he had had a hunch that it could be done. There were squad room tales in the Army, that, if true, proved it. But the one they'd tell about him . . .

He would do now what he had always intended to do if this thing came to pass. He turned away from the window and walked slowly to his room. He moved carefully through the squad room. But, though the lights were out and the men long turned in, he heard restless grunts and movements. Men couldn't sleep in heat like this, no matter how tired.

An issue lantern burned in Piggot's room. It made the heat seem more palpable. By its blurred light he got the few things together he intended to take with him. No Government property save the clothes on his back and the pistol and canteen his very existence in strange desert country might depend upon. His clothing savings would pay for them. And he'd have to take old Baldy; you can't cover ground between water in the desert fast enough on foot. He thought a moment. The last contract price for Government mounts was one hundred and forty dollars. He counted the amount from a roll of bills in the tray of his footlocker. He sealed the money in an envelop, penciling on it an explanation of the enclosed money. He blew out the light and walked softly from the barracks.

A sharp new moon was ahead of him, low in the sky. Thick clustered stars hung close and luminous over the desert. His horse, old Baldy, plodded on, his hoofs quiet in the sand of the river trail. The cottonwood dropped away. Thin, majestically tall yucca and bunchy soapweed hedged the twisting trail. The edges of the far mountains showed a penciled line of light against the heavens.

Piggot watched the horse's ears alertly. Old Baldy, proof against the ordinary night phenomena of the Border, would become an eager and interested wayfarer if sight or sound or smell of his kind came to him. And men in this country would not be abroad afoot.

There were two gantlets to run: Breen's patrol and Valdes' rabid outlaw foragers. And it was the duty of Breen's detachment to patrol this river trail. Especially the ford farther up. That was the only safe place to cross in the time he had left until daylight. The ford at the camp was under the watchful eye of a sentry.

He had decided about Breen. No use trying to slip by him and his men. They'd be on the job, allright. His own disciplining and training would have seen to that. They knew it was like him to inspect at night. A patrol had been caught napping once. It had never happened since. He'd get a slug in his back for certain if he tried it.

He'd tell Breen he was going across. Against orders, sure. Just a little personal reconnaissance. Hadn't one of his men been hit by snipers just that afternoon in this sector? He'd ask about that, too. How Hoffman had been hit. And his last act would be to bawl Breen out for sending a wounded man in alone.

He thought about Fanchon, the man sleeping off his ugly drunk back there in the guardhouse cell. They'd keep Fanchon in there awhile until it dawned upon them that their platoon sergeant wasn't coming back. No one would dare do it before; not even the aggressive Moylan, who hated him more than the others. Moylan would strut a few days in command. Then they'd notify headquarters. By that time he'd be far to the south. If he was lucky, he'd be a captain or something in Alleva's army of Northern Mexico. Fanchon would never know how close he had come . . .

A new thought came to him. That money in the envelop. A quixotic idiot he'd been to leave that. He hated the thought of the hurt and disappointment it would give the colonel to realize that a man he had banked on would desert.

So much easier to have left as something of a hero. If he hadn't put that money there on his table, for any one to find, they'd never know he hadn't been taken by Valdes' men. But his pride rebelled against that. He was running from the past like the coward that past had proved him to be. He'd be damned if he would turn thief!

He shook himself out of this bitter reverie. Checked up where he was. Nearing the ford now, and still no sign of Breen's men. Odd. Long before he should have encountered troopers riding the river bank. He'd have something to say to Breen for that, too.

The trail cut into a wide, sandy road that led from the ford back toward civilization. More cottonwoods now. He could hear the ripples at the broad, shallow ford. He swung sharply to the left into the road. He saw the glitter of the stars on the swirling water. Baldy, quickened by the accessibility of cool drinking water, tugged at the reins. Piggot let him rush in, knee deep, and bury his dusty old face in the gurgling river. He swung around in his saddle, amazed at the quietness. No sign of life anywhere.

Suddenly he saw something, a dark, bulking object on the American bank, just off the ford road. He studied it closely. A horse lying down. But no gleam from saddle or bits . . .

He forced the reluctant Baldy back up the bank. He dismounted and examined the horse. One of his own it was, and dead. A pool of drying blood spread from its torn head.

HE JERKED out his flashlight, swinging its white spray of brightness about the ground. Empty cartridge cases—plenty of them. Feverishly now he searched the brush. He stumbled over the body of a man, stripped of all vestige of uniform clothing. Carson—Kit, they called him. The youngest man in the platoon. A kid of eighteen, with a bullet through his ear.

He held the light steady on the boy's face. The expression was querulous—like the grimace of a hurt child. He'd always liked this youngster; been a little easier on him than with the others. And he sensed young Carson had thought of him as something of a god.

He'd let Carson down—and Breen, and the others. Hoffman's inability to speak was no excuse. Poor judgment on his part to have misread the signs of the wounded man coming in alone. The very horror on his face was significant. And Breen had always done his duty well.

It was characteristic of Piggot that his own affairs became instantly relegated to the subconscious. His soldier instinct told him just what had happened. Hoffman had been hit while patrolling away from the main body of the detachment. Cut off, he'd made a run for it. Breen and the rest had been jumped at the ford. The empties showed where the stand had been made. There were no other bodies; and none of the rest had come in. Clearly they were captives of Valdes' men. Hostages, held for ransom or intimidation. That was always Valdes' idea.

Instantly he knew what he must do. No time now to ride back. And orders were adamant about crossing the line. It would be unfair to those others to lead them to almost certain death—or at best a general court-martial. For it had been impressed by written order that a command to cross the line, unless it came from a general officer, was illegal.

Piggot made certain that there were no more bodies, or wounded men lying hidden about under cover. He called softly several times to make sure. But his voice sounded empty and impotent in the silence of the desert night. He tightened Baldy's cinch, swung into the saddle. He splashed through the ford, trotted up the opposite bank and galloped south into Mexico.

The light in the eastern sky was growing strong as he saw the low 'dobe huts of Palomas. Low, sandy hills encircled

the town. He branched off the beaten road, working his way through the waist high mesquite toward the highest of these. There had been enough light before he left the road to make certain of the tracks. He had dismounted and examined them carefully. A mounted detachment of size had undoubtedly passed recently. And among the maze of hoofprints he had found no difficulty in diagnosing the larger and heavier shoe marks of his own horses.

He rode rapidly around the town, taking care to keep under cover of the sheltering hills. South of the village and well over a concealing ridge, he again picked up the road. The light was broad now. Again he dismounted, studying expertly the dusty way. The pack had not passed through Palomas. No tracks here.

So intent was he, as he crouched there staring at the sand, that it was not until the tugging of the reins in his hand startled him that he realized the precariousness of his exposed position. Baldy had thrown up his head. Tired though he was, his ragged ears were cocked alertly forward, his eyes fixed and eager.

Piggot followed the old charger's eyes. His hand dropped to his holster. Then he reached for his stirrup and swung into the saddle. Nothing that he had yet seen gave cause for immediate alarm. Just an old peon leading a burro, a woman slumped on its back. But every one here was a potential enemy. Just a word to Valdes' men that he was even in the neighborhood . . . And who could guess what might be behind this harmless pair, just back of the ridge?

Either move off now or—

Piggot thought rapidly. Alone, he could do little; especially in broad daylight. At best he would have to wait until night, a long way off, before he would dare chance entering the town. Even then he would need a disguise of some sort. After all, an American trooper in uniform could hardly walk boldly into the streets of Palomas with Valdes' killers swaggering everywhere.

A sudden wild idea came to him. Overpower the approaching man, tie him up in some arroyo and use his burro and clothing as a cover for his own expedition into the town.

He rode slowly toward the Mexican, his right hand on his pistol butt. As he drew closer a low, insistent wailing greeted him. The woman swayed in the rough saddle. Her black head was bowed so that he could not see her face. Her shoulders, under a tattered *roboso,* shook. The peon, an old fellow, seamed of face, looked up at the woman. He walked sidewise in the sand, leading the burro by a short rope. He talked in a low, soft voice to the woman.

At the sound of Baldy's hoofs the man looked up. He turned a kindly, pathetically simple face toward the American. The dimmed brown eyes looked like those of an old and dying horse. They were watery with the tears of age.

"*'S dias, señor soldado,*" the old man said. He lifted the high, tattered straw hat from his head, his withered hand grasping it by the brim in back.

"*Dias,*" Piggot said, and he smiled. He didn't know why he smiled. But the sorrow and gentleness in that old face made it certain that he would have to look for another.

"*Que pasa?*"

He pointed to the shuddering woman, who had not even moved her head upward.

"*Mucho molesto, señor*—trouble," the old man said. "It is my daughter, the little Estrella."

"What's wrong with her?" Piggot said kindly. Somehow he felt intensely sorry for the old man. There was such simple dignity in his resigned manner.

"It was the men of Valdes."

THE girl shuddered at the words. She threw a bare brown arm across her face, bending it even lower over the burro's neck. Baldy sniffed at the drooping head of the little animal.

"The devils!" Piggot said.

"Then you are not with them, señor?" the old man said mildly. He appeared pathetically surprised.

"They've killed my men—captured some of them."

The old man thought, looking down perplexed at the sandy road.

"I remember," he said. "Yes, they have them in the small house by the little corn mill. They walked them through the town, those gringos. Ropes on their necks like steers. Led behind the men of Valdes, who laughed and hooted at them. Some of the women did, too, from the doorways of the houses. It is very bad these days in Mexico, señor. I can remember, in the days of the noble Diaz—"

"Would you help those gringos—with the ropes on their necks?"

The old man looked down sadly. His withered hands shook as he rubbed them one against the other.

"I am an old man, and I take my daughter, the little Estrella—"

"Listen, *viejo,* you see that gun?"

Piggot drew the weapon from its holster and held it up in the bright morning sun. The peon blinked at it.

"That is for the men of Valdes— For what they did to your girl—and for the ropes around the necks of my men."

A quick gleam came into the bleared eyes. A flash of fire, that perhaps once had been natural before the years and pain and horror had stamped it almost out.

The girl jerked her head up. She turned great brown eyes, red rimmed from weeping, toward Piggot. He saw that, in spite of the havoc her agony had wrought, her face was beautiful. A greater ugliness surged up in him. The girl looked at the blue, bright pistol. Color came into her wan cheeks. Her dead eyes leaped to life. A stream of wild words poured from her, too fast for Piggot to translate. Whatever she said, it awoke the old man. He, too, began to talk—swift, short sentences. At last the girl turned to Piggot again.

"He will do what you like, señor." She beat her breast with her hand. "And I—I will do anything!"

Piggot put his pistol back, carefully buttoning the flap of the holster. He shook out his reins. A new tightness had come into his face. His eyes were set, hard.

"Follow me," he said.

He swung his horse toward the hills.

THE sun was low. Still there was no sign of the old man. Piggot had hollowed a place in the rocky soil behind a thick clump of greasewood. Through this he had broken branches here and there so that he could see down into the town of Palomas and still keep carefully under cover. A few yards below him, in a washed out furrow of the reverse slope of the hill, Baldy stood patiently. It was all the same to him, either side of the line, as long as the oats lasted and the grass wasn't dusty.

Hours now Piggot had lain behind the greasewood. Old Ignacio had promised to return the instant he obtained definite information as to the intended disposition of the captives. And he was to get word to them. American money was worth twice its stated value in Mexico these days. Ignacio carried all the small bills that Piggot had brought. Enough to buy any man in the town if handled shrewdly.

Once during the nerve wracking hours of waiting, Piggot started up, taut and ready. A small band of mounted men rode swiftly out from the town. They rode directly toward his hiding place. He loosed his pistol. No use to run for it on his tired horse. But they'd suffer like hell before they took him alive.

He turned to the girl Estrella, who lay with her arms over her eyes in the sand beside him.

"*Mira—*"

The girl sat up. She stared, blinking through the screen of little leaves.

"*Soldados de Valdes,*" she said softly.

"*Vienen*—They come."

An ugly frown came as he faced the girl. He drew the pistol and held it before her.

"If your father sent them—"

She understood what he meant. She shuddered and drew quickly back from him.

"No, no, no!" she cried.

"You will die, too—in the firing, *chiquita.*"

"I know," she said. Her eyes remained fixed on his face. They were bewildered, hurt. "I thought you were brave—and honest," she said simply.

The horsemen swung on to the trail that led to the river. They took up an easy, swinging gallop. Piggot watched them, his eyes screwed up against the sun.

"I am," he said.

"You think my father would leave me here with you—alone," the girl said, "if he did not trust you?"

"No."

"But you do not trust him, nor me."

She seemed so small, so pathetic, kneeling there in the sharp, rocky ground. Her eyes were wide and round in her small oval face. She turned her face away from him, rose to her feet and brushed her tattered dress with her hand. She started to walk away, her head hanging, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"I go," she said miserably.

A QUICK stab of remorse shot through Piggot. He strode after her. He clutched her thin shoulder and turned her about gently. Stubbornly she stared at the ground. Two big tears coursed down her cheeks. She looked defiantly at him through the tears as he turned her soft chin up with his hand.

"Let me go," she said. "I want to go. I will meet my father at the road. What have you done but make for us more trouble?"

"I'm sorry. I am in much trouble. I can't take chances."

She dashed the tears away with her hand. Her mouth trembled but the color was high in her cheeks. Her eyes blazed.

"Trouble! What do you know about trouble or taking chances! You're a coward, *soldado!* You snap like a cur at the hand that helps you. You run from your own people to Valdes, the Mexican, to escape the fighting!"

Piggot stood shamed before her lashing words. She again made as though to leave him. Bitterness possessed him. Even this ragged peon girl had lost faith in him.

He seized her roughly. Forcibly he pushed her to a sitting position behind a soapweed stump. His own eyes were blazing now.

"Damn you," he said. "I'll tell you a tale of trouble."

She became placid, suddenly looking up at him with wondering eyes. She picked nervously at her torn dress, pulling it closer about her knees. She started talking softly.

"Shut up!" Piggot said gruffly, but his eyes relented as they rested on her face. "I know you've had a tough time. So have I. Now listen to me—"

"I will be quiet as a lizard in the sun, señor," she said.

Piggot got a grim, almost proud satisfaction in telling what had happened to him and to Fanchon. He need make no excuses, soften any of the details. To this one who had been in the hands of Valdes' men, a simple tale of drunkenness and cowardice would hold little horror.

". . . I was just a boy—but a second lieutenant commanding a platoon of men. I was proud as hell, Estrellita . . . These Moros—you wouldn't understand—but they are fierce people in a place called the Philippines."

"Like the soldiers of Valdes? Yes, I understand."

"I got *baracho*—drunk every night. I thought it was smart—"

"*Mescal* there, too, eh?"

"*Bino*—worse than *mescal.* No whisky, because we were in a lonely

station, with me in command. All the soldiers under me older than I was—some old enough to be my father. Fanchon was the worst. He was my platoon sergeant."

"Next to you in the rank?"

"Next to me in the rank, yes. He was my hero—secretly, of course, because I was the big officer commanding men."

"And you were very young—you smiled a lot then, perhaps?"

"I got drunk every night. Laughed like a hyena. Barked like a coyote."

"Like a coyote—what a funny thing to do!"

"I did funnier things. I let Fanchon give me advice."

"He was your friend, this Fanchon?"

"As much a friend as Valdes and his men."

"*Enemigo?*"

"Yes, enemy. The worst sort. He saw that I looked upon him as an old-timer—a man who knew his stuff and who would go through hell behind his officer. At West Point we heard things like that about the old noncoms in the Army."

"You gave him the trust. It is wrong, sometimes."

"It was wrong as hell this time. He told me men shouldn't drill in a place like that. They were old soldiers. Let them loaf and be happy. When it came to a fight, they'd be there."

"He drank, too, with you, this man?"

"Not with me; I was his officer; a little tin god in my own eyes. But I knew he was drunk. He knew I knew it. He got the money from me. He was laughing at me behind my back."

"You all got drunk then together?"

She said it simply, as a statement of understandable life. It went on all around her—officers and their men getting drunk together.

He relighted his pipe and stared out across the desert, shimmering in the high sun. In those dancing heat waves he saw the little palm sheltered nipa camp. He saw the sun go down over Illana Bay. The gecko lizards croaked in the trees. It was the Fourth of July. Fanchon had impressed the fact on him since the night before. All day the fun had gone on. Alone and drunk in his little shack he grinned out the window at the antics of his men. Good fellows, great fighters. Soon he hoped to lead them into action. Maybe win the Medal of Honor taking some Moro town . . .

Fanchon ran the details. Designated the guards. He supposed they were on. Fanchon had soldiered longer than he. The sentries would be placed by Fanchon. He remembered looking upward at the faintly grating palm fronds that hung against the roof of the hut. The flag still at the top of its pole, gleaming there, blood red in the dying sun. How beautiful! At the time it had not seemed strange that it should still be there. There wasn't any retreat blown on the Fourth of July. Let the lads have their fun. Later, and drunker, he heard the first shots . . .

It all happened so swiftly. To this day he couldn't piece together the speeding bits of that horror. The arm racks were locked. Fanchon had the key. The drunken men fought the razor sharp *barongs* with whatever came to hand—bits of wood they picked up, shovels; several he saw backs to a wall, their mess kits beating out futilely.

He himself fought coolly enough with his pistol. He tried to rally his men. Fanchon was nowhere to be found. Later, he and Fanchon miraculously the only two left alive. And even more miraculously, unwounded.

Fanchon wanted him to lie. To say that all precautions had been taken. They were sober now and Fanchon was afraid. He struck Fanchon, beating him about the face, driving him unconscious to the ground. He sobbed hysterically, looking about him at the hacked bodies of his men, the flies already swarming about them. He stumbled back through the jungle alone, and by another miracle arrived unharmed at headquarters. Fanchon, too, made it. The Moros evi-

dently had had enough of blood and had gone away for awhile. He told the colonel what had happened. Fanchon, bitter, hating him because he would not whitewash the whole affair, cursed him before the court. Lied horribly about him—but said nothing of his own skulking.

SO HE WAS dismissed for drunkenness and cowardice. Everybody felt sorry for the old soldier, Fanchon, who had been let down with the rest of the men, by a drunken shavetail. And now, under another name, he had been making good. He had proved he was not a drunkard. His last drink had been taken that Fourth of July. He might have proved something else—if Fanchon had not returned. "Yes, we all got drunk. We had a great time . . . "

"And is that all?"

"That's all."

"An odd story to make one sad," Estrella reflected. "I thought somewhere in it would come the woman." She was disappointed.

"Have you a *cigarillo,* señor?"

He relented at the unbelief in her eyes. He told her the rest of the story as he had seen it in the heat waves of the desert. She sat silent a moment, watching him when he was through talking. Then she said:

"And for that, you leave your beautiful country—because a man might tell your true name. Is that a crime?"

"They would send me to prison for enlisting under a false name after having been dishonorably dismissed."

"Ah! Why did you not then kill this man Fanchon?"

There was nothing to say to this that she would understand. He turned away from her and stared once again at the town.

As the sun sank, Piggot became more restless. No sign of Ignacio. Perhaps it was already too late. Breen and his men might long ago have been put against the wall. The only hope he had was the old man's belief that Valdes would hold the men for ransom. As yet he had not executed the few soldiers that had fallen into his hands. There was one case where the United States Government had authorized the commanding general of the sector to pay ten thousand in gold for the release of two men who had been captured, innocently fishing in the river on their own side of the line.

But why didn't the Mexican return? He had had all day to wander about the town with his little burro. He could have questioned every inhabitant in this time. Perhaps it was that he feared to attract attention leaving the town twice during daylight. Yet, why should any one be interested in the movements of an old man and his burro?

"*Vienes!*"

Piggot followed the girl's pointing finger. Where the road left the town to the south a distant figure could be seen. Trailing behind it came a burro. Piggot cursed his righteousness in not having taken his field glasses. After all, the Government still owed him his pay. It was already the third of July and no sign of the paymaster yet when he had left.

The figures became more distinct.

"*Padre mio,*" the girl said, "*y Chico.*"

"I don't think much of Chico's gaits," Piggot said.

It was utterly dark when old Ignacio came cautiously up the arroyo. He was worn and shaky after the long walk, because he was old and the experiences of the past few days had left him weak. But he trembled with eagerness to tell his news.

"Still there," he said. "*Dos soldados gringos.*"

"Breen and Hunter. . . You get word to them?" Piggot asked the old man in Spanish.

"*Si, senor.* It was not difficult. The paper you gave to me it was simple to pass through the lazy soldier guard of Valdes. Two green duros made the fellow's eyes dart from his head. He would

hang his mother for less than those two duros."

"And the clothes?"

Proudly the old man tore at the meager pack on Chico's rusty sides and exhibited his purchases.

"Here—very fine clothes, too. But it was difficult—finding those of outstanding size. It took most of my hours to locate them."

"For the love of Mike!"

Piggot had his first good laugh for weeks as he looked into the honest face of the old man. Wasting precious, tortured hours, while he shopped grandly for clothes that would fit!

And they did fit. A little gay, Piggot thought wryly as he knotted the bright *vaquero* scarf and fingered the high crowned hat, heavy with silver knots. Poor old man—he wanted to do honor to his new friend, his daughter's chivalrous knight . . .

Stars stood out from the dark vault of the sky like a maze of golden studs, as they started back to the town. Estrella they left with Chico and Baldy. They moved straight for the scattered lights of the town. Piggot hitched the heavy cartridge belt that Ignacio had unobtrusively bought for him, closer against his waist. His own automatic was pushed deep down into the holster, yet ready to his hand. Much like a soldier of Valdes he looked as he practised the swagger and movements of the hand that the old man urged. His face, burned black by the Border sun, was as swarthy as any Mexican's. Only his height gave him an unreal appearance. Still, he couldn't ask for everything. He was already away ahead of his luck.

Skulking would not do. Ignacio had warned against that, and his own common sense told him the man was right. He looked enough like a Mexican to pass casual inspection in the dimly lighted streets. He thanked God for the small dark mustache he wore. And for the Philippine and Border service—that had taught him the vernacular well enough for his present purpose.

THEY entered the town boldly, Ignacio carrying a roll of blanket and a canteen, much as a humble peon might in trail of a lordly *soldado* of the conquering Valdes. Booted, armed men brushed by them. Light came from the smoke filled *cantinas* and from the open doorways of the mud hovels where the townspeople dwelt. Loud, drunken voices roared *"La Cucaracha,"* that song that glorified the hero Villa; that reviled and hooted the senile Carranza. Guitars mixed their melodies on the hot night air. Thumpings of heavy boots on bare earth floors, the banging of glasses on bars, curses, and the coquettish screams of women. Soft laughter and women's voices from the open windows. And the hot, throbbing desert stars over it all . . .

Three soldiers passed, their arms interlocked, weaving across the width of the narrow street.

"'Dias," they said.

"'Dias, compadres," Piggot said brightly.

They passed, laughing. Every one was *compadre* tonight, for tonight they rode *—no es verdad?*

"They ride, tonight—Valdes' men. They all say so in the town," Ignacio whispered timidly.

Piggot was looking warily up the street.

"Yes?" he said absently. "Ride where?"

"They say to cross the river. They will kill all the gringo soldiers there. At a little fort, some say."

Piggot seized the old man in a terrible grip.

"Where? What little fort?"

But Ignacio was alarmed. Why did the gringo's eyes flash so? He had said that he was hunted by those others—his own people. And that he rode south to the hero Alleva. So why—?

"We must be quiet on the street," he warned. "Let us go."

They reached the house where Ignacio said the captives were held under guard.

"It is there," he said softly. "But do

not look. See, the guard is there by the back part. The door in front is nailed against the curious women."

"And the horses?" Piggot whispered. His heart was beating high in his breast. It was difficult even to breathe. It all seemed so simple. A quiet, dark little 'dobe house, with a single careless sentry on watch. The town given over to merriment. No one, apparently, to give them heed.

"The horses? Back there in a small corral—saddled."

For the first time in his life Piggot could contemplate with equanimity the custom of the Mexicans to leave horses for long hours of waiting under the cruel stock saddles. It would stand him and his men in good stead now. He had made no plans. The bold, quick, unexpected act stood the best chance in war when you were outnumbered. He knew that much. And now that he was actually standing in front of the house Ignacio had described so carefully, he saw nothing better to do than the simple, direct thing. He stooped and spoke a few low words to the peon. Ignacio obediently moved forward into the dark space that separated the hut from a neighbor house.

"*'Dias, señor capitan,*" he said softly to the sentry.

Piggot leaned heavily against the old man. He started a low, mournful humming.

The sentry swung about at the old man's words. He shifted his long Mauser so that it pointed toward the two.

"Beat it," he said.

"My friend would rest. Is it allowed, señor?"

"No drunks here, *papacito.* Unless—" he looked sharply at Piggot— "you are befriending a soldier of the great Valdes, who perhaps has a drop of *mescal* still left outside his hide."

"It is the case," said Ignacio, and he made to fish his hand down into Piggot's trouser pocket. Piggot resisted this. The soldier laughed and grounded his rifle.

"Lead him hither, old one," he said amiably. "Perhaps I have a better paw for roaming than one of your years. Let us see—"

He laid his rifle against the wall of the hut. Piggot's pistol barrel caught him on the side of the head before he had straightened up. He fell silently and lay with his face pushed into the loose dirt. Piggot leaped over the body and into the house, followed by the old man, knife in hand. Fifteen seconds later four silent figures moved swiftly toward the corrals—and freedom . . .

Outside the town the four riders took up a slow lope.

"We leave you here, the Mexican and I," Piggot said quietly. The troopers on either side of him peered into his face.

"What's that?" Breen said.

"You push on across," Piggot said evenly. "I'll—be along later."

Breen thought the sergeant's voice sounded funny.

"You haven't been wounded, Piggot?" He didn't like this sergeant, but the fellow had guts, pulling off a stunt like this.

"No. I'm O.K. Just riding back with the old fellow. Want to see that he and his girl get off all right."

Breen reined in his horse. He looked closely at Piggot.

"Are you nuts? Do you figure what those guys will be up against by daylight tomorrow—if they're attacked back there at camp?"

"Are you giving me orders?" Piggot said.

"Hell—I been so excited I didn't think you mightn't know. All day they been kiddin' us how Valdes' men was plannin' to wipe out the outfit. Never thought we'd get away to spill the beans. It's the only place they can drive cattle through quick, so they gonna wipe it out before the raid so they can use the ford. No one won't know about it until they's through an' back again with all the steers in the Big Bend. They even tried to get dope on the camp outa us. We give 'em the razz."

PIGGOT sat very still on his horse looking at Corporal Breen. He said, trying to keep his voice from rising in a fierce crescendo of fury:

"You birds back there think you know it all. There isn't one of you doesn't hate my guts—"

"Maybe," Breen said.

The coolness of the man's voice maddened Piggot.

"Now, damn it, you get a scare, you come bawling to me!"

The two troopers said nothing. They just sat their horses there in the dim starlight, looking at Piggot.

"That B. J. Moylan—he thinks he knows more about soldiering than I do. Let him run your show!"

Breen kept looking fixedly at Piggot. This was a new Piggot. It was utterly unlike the man to allow a subordinate the slightest leeway in independence of command.

"You ain't comin' back, Piggot?" Breen said.

For some vague reason—pride, possibly, Piggot now thought—he had wanted his last contact with his men to be one of authority. He wanted them to remember him to the last as they had known him, cold, hard, despotic—but right. He was furious now at the ready suspicions that had come from this dumb corporal. He resented the accuracy of his intuition, the quickness of doubt. To go back now with the other two would be weakness. He hated them all as they hated him. It was men, just such a type as were in that platoon, that had let him down in the Islands. And these men would too if he were to give them a moment's respite from arduous routine. What had the past five years of perfect soldiering gotten him? A Fanchon come back out of a nightmare to nullify it all. To laugh in his face and show him up before these men who hated him. To tell them that he was a "fraud-and" as the soldiers called one who enlisted fraudulently.

If he went back there, by the laws of the Army, he should immediately be stripped of authority. Trust Fanchon, the guardhouse lawyer, to know regulations on that. The surly Moylan would take over command. Confine him in that hot little cell just emptied of Fanchon. The men would stare in the window at him as at a browbeaten lion, hooting, making wisecracks for him to hear.

"No, I'm not coming back," Piggot said.

"You're lettin' the outfit down," Breen said in a monotonous voice. He was a man of little education and mediocre intellect. But he was a born soldier. He thought dully and wonderingly about this unheard of skulking, as he sat there looking at his sergeant. "I never woulda said you didn't have guts," he said. "That's one thing no guy never said agin you. You fooled me, all right."

"Get going!" Piggot said. He laid his hand on his pistol butt.

"If I was armed, I'd bring you back—me an' Hunter here, you lousy coward!"

Piggot drew the pistol. He pointed it straight at Breen's chest.

"Beat it," he said.

Without another word the two troopers legged their horses and loped away, moving north along the trail that led to the river. Piggot sheathed the weapon.

"Let's go," he said to Ignacio.

The two rode in silence through the mesquite toward the hills.

Estrellita was awaiting them. Baldy let out an alarming welcome, his thin neigh ringing out in the desert night. The three stood awkwardly, looking at one another.

"*Bueno?*" the girl asked, her eyes questioning Piggot.

"We got them away," he said shortly.

Ignacio burst out into a torrent of excited Spanish. The strain of the thing over, he was volubly proud. Elaborately he embroidered the evening's adventures, omitting nothing, adding much. The girl held her hands tightly to her breast. She gasped with eagerness as the old man's tale unfolded.

"Let's get going," Piggot said. "They've probably missed them already and a search may be started."

"You go—with us?" the girl said.

"I'll ride a way, yes. It'll be safer for all of us. When we get to this town of yours maybe I can pick up a guide to take me to Alleva."

The girl was silent. She continued to stare up at him in an odd, puzzled way. At last she said, softly—

"Is that the way, *amigo,* to punish the men of Valdes?"

"I don't get you," Piggot said.

"My father—he says they go now to kill your men. Already they have insult you by putting the ropes about their necks. You will not punish them?"

"I'll get a crack at them when I join Alleva. Don't worry, baby."

The girl looked down at the ground. Piggot felt uncomfortable. Fury rose in him anew. Was every one in the world going to tell him what to do? He said angrily:

"I told you what would happen to me—back there. They can take care of themselves. I've knocked discipline and training into them."

The girl said softly:

"You tell me what happened once—how you failed because you were young and did not know. Now you know. You did not make that same mistake with these new men you command. But now nobody will know. You do not stay to prove this thing. The five years you work are wasted, *amigo.* Do you not see?"

A sudden picture swam before Piggot's eyes—a picture like that he had seen some hours before in the desert mirage. His blood heated and raced as the picture grew before him there in the dark. He saw himself tearing through the night on the faithful Baldy. Winging across country, straight as the bird flies, for the river. Slashing through the ford at La Reina. Beating Breen and Hunter in. Facing Fanchon and the others—they'd let him fight, never fear. Every rifle would count. And with the hell that would soon be popping, his chances of stopping a bullet would be good—and he'd improve them. He saw now, clearly, that this was better than being shoveled into an unmarked grave farther south. And that, at best, would only be a question of a few months.

He bent swiftly, lifting the girl's oval face up between his big hands. She smiled, her white teeth gleaming in the starlight.

"*Adios, chiquita!*"

"*Vengase con Dios, Señor Gringo,*" she said softly.

He mounted and rode swiftly away.

THE stars were paling as he rode on to the trail that led to the camp ford. The desert night was still, hushed with the suspense of waiting for the dawn. From now on he must gallop for it. For if Valdes meant to cross here there would be outguards watching the crossing. He drew his pistol, snapping off the safety latch. Clearly, now, he could see the huddle of his outfit's 'dobe buildings across the river. He even saw the shadowy movement of the sentry walking post. Swift calculation, orders, dispositions raced through his brain. The lower patrol must be called in. The men got into their assigned places for defense. The machine gun details at their posts . . .

He pictured the neat arrangement of his men as one who had worked, many times, a simple jig saw puzzle. All ready and knew their jobs, thank God. He'd sweated it into them. Like a football team they'd done it a hundred times. Nights he'd called them to arms out of heavy sleep. Ugly, hating him, they obeyed like marionettes pulled by a single string—his string . . .

No sound except the beating hoofs of his horse as it plunged eagerly on. Old Baldy knew where he was, now. That picket line, with its sweet smell of night hay. He stuck his ears up, whinnying.

Then suddenly life woke in the desert: vicious, raging life. Bright yellow-blue

tongues of flame leaped from the mesquite. The banging of rifles broke the brooding silence. Piggot lay low on his horse, driving his spurs home mercilessly. Above the rush of the water torn up by the animal's feet, as it plunged through the ford, he could hear the plunking of bullets all about him. Halfway across now and the gallant old horse staggered against the high water. Above the uproar a whistle, shrill and alarmed, screamed out in front of him. Moylan on the job, thank God!

Then, eerily, incredible, the hoarse notes of a bugle. It thrilled him even as it made him laugh, grimly. Movie stuff—just what would happen in the movies. And would not happen once in a hundred years in the real thing. Training, habit: he'd insisted on that bugle—on every call being blown. They'd laughed behind his back. But here it was all the same. That's the way they'd done it in practise—the way he'd taught them. And that's the way they were doing it now. Pray God they were doing the rest as faithfully.

Fire broke out from the camp in front of him. He screamed above the foaming water.

"Cut that out, you damned fools! Cease firing!"

He tore his whistle from his breast pocket and blew a long blast.

"Cease firing!"

He heard a voice sharply raised above the rifle fire. The firing ceased. Baldy plunged to his knees, fell flat, shuddering, his nose driven into the muddy bank. He was loose in a moment, tearing on foot up the gentle slope.

"It's Piggot—don't fire," he called.

"Cut out that noise!" he heard Moylan rage.

They opened the heavy door for him. A dim round globed lantern threw a faint light around the squad room. It had been placed on the dirt floor so as to show no sign through the narrow windows. The men, lying flat along the loopholed walls, turned their heads to watch him. He glanced quickly around the room. The sandbags were already packed closely about the windows as he had taught them to do. The machine gun crews in the corners of the house were at their posts. The emergency water cans were full to the brim. The storeroom door was open, the ammunition cases piled and ready . . .

"Good work, Moylan!"

A wild exultation, like an unusual beginning of drunkenness was in him. The training he had given them for an emergency they laughed at, had borne perfect fruit.

"Thought you was lost, Sergeant."

That's all Moylan said. All any one said. The other men had turned back again and were staring intently through the narrow slits that had been cut for them.

Moylan stood in his underwear, a web pistol belt at his waist. He held a rifle at the order in his right hand. He smiled a little sheepishly at Piggot. He touched the pistol at his side.

"Took this out of the supply room. Figured you mighta been caught out an' I'd have to run things."

Moylan was apologizing for the assumption of authority that was so taboo here. A pistol was only for the commander.

"You will—have to run things," Piggot said.

Moylan didn't understand.

"Brought in the downriver patrol," he said. "Found you was gone an' I got worried. Rode upriver. Found Carson. Tough luck—pretty tough luck for a kid on his first hitch."

"Yes, tough luck," Piggot heard himself saying. He should be saying something else.

"Breen—"

"I figured that, too," Moylan said, a little embarrassed. "I knowed this was due—" He waved a vague hand toward the front of the shack. Outside, from across the river, scattered shots continued to sound.

"You're a damned good man, Moylan," Piggot heard himself say. He was

utterly surprised at the words.

"Now what?" Moylan said, looking at Piggot with his narrowed, shrewd eyes.

PIGGOT looked from man to man as they lay, rifles under their arms, on the bare floor. Some of them looked back at Piggot, wondering at his haggard face and odd dress. Fixed up like a spick bandit—eyes funny looking—What the hell!

"Where's Fanchon?"

A wild burst of fire came from in front of the building.

"They's comin' over! Here they come! . . ."

Piggot ran to a window. The faint light of dawn made the pack of horsemen black and clean cut against the river.

"Fire at will!" he said instinctively.

An amazing sound filled the room. The walls shook under the crashing of the high powered rifles.

"The damned fools," Piggot thought, "rushing us in close order like that . . ."

But in spite of the rapid fire from the barracks and the stream of machine gun bullets whipping the river into a troubled white sheet, some of the Mexicans made it. Some floundered back. The ford was choked with dead and wounded horses. Horrible screams rose above the roar of the firing.

"Keep an eye out in the rear there," Piggot yelled above the noise. He shouted close to Moylan's ear, "Watch out back there; some of them may have crossed above. This in front is only a feint."

He wondered where Breen and Hunter were. He tried to shout his question into Moylan's ear but the corporal only shook his head.

"Ain't come in yet," he said. "Got 'em with Carson, probably."

There was too much noise to try to explain. And he was too busy to locate Fanchon. The quick glance he had given the men about the floor had shown no sign of him.

The barracks was isolated from the other buildings. He had seen to that, early in their service here. Everything near it that might interfere with a field of fire had been razed. The men had growled and laughed at that, too. But now they knew. The river was some two hundred yards of smooth, sloping ground away. It would be a tough job or a miracle for a man to make that distance unhurt in the face of this accurate fire. What he mostly feared was a crossing at the ford where Breen's patrol had been jumped. From there the Mexicans could move unopposed down the river and take him from the rear.

Moylan interrupted his reflections.

"Horses saddled up, ready," he shouted.

"Good," Piggot said. "We may need them for a counter attack."

"Counter attack! Hell, Sergeant, we gotta whole army on us it looks like. Only use them *caballos* gonna do us is to make a getaway!"

Piggot had blown his whistle for suspension of fire a moment before. In the unnatural stillness of the room Moylan's words carried clearly to the men. They turned over restlessly, all eyes on Piggot. They had seen the might of Valdes clearly in that churning, bloody ford, and were not to be misled by the seeming ease of this first repulse. The Mexicans knew the river country. It wouldn't be long before they'd infiltrate across by some less exposed way.

Piggot looked from face to face. It gave him an odd sense of satisfaction that he was at this minute more concerned with the emotions of the men of the platoon than the prospect of suddenly looking into Fanchon's eyes.

"You better get them spick duds off," Moylan said uncritically. "If they take the place they'll hang you higher'n a kite if they catch you in 'em."

A mild eyed Swede, lying close to Piggot's feet, looked up at him respectfully.

"Tank dee git us, Sergint?"

Other men began to mutter.

A surly voice arose from somewhere far back in the room.

"We better beat it now—while the beatin's good."

"Who said that?" Piggot called sharply.

There was no answer.

Moylan looked questioningly at Piggot. He said softly, walking closer to the sergeant so that the men could not hear:

"What do you think? We could make it if we start now. Before any of the horses are down—"

"I'm going to get into uniform," Piggot said.

He turned away and walked into his room, closing the door behind him. Everything was as he had left it, including the envelop containing Baldy's contract price. Poor Baldy—no money needed to explain his loss now. Killed in action—expendable now.

Rapidly he changed breeches, shoes, leggings. He unfolded a newly laundered O. D. shirt. His best. He stared at the new, clean cut sergeant's stripes on the sleeves. He wasn't a sergeant any more: not even a soldier; nor a citizen. Standing there, looking at those stripes, a story came into his mind—read as a boy in grammar school. It had always frightened him, that story of a man without a country. They'd placed him on a ship of war. Never let him set foot on the soil of his native land. The man Nolan, who had cursed his flag . . .

From a rough wooden shelf set over the cot he took his razor. Carefully he severed the threads that held the hard earned stripes to the woolen cloth. He put on the shirt, buttoning it meticulously at the neck.

A burst of firing came from outside. Loud cries came from the squad room. Above it all, Piggot could hear the rising beat of hoofs.

"Breen's comin'!" somebody yelled.

"Stand by that back door!" Moylan said. "Pipe down, you guys!"

BREEN made the last hundred yards on foot. He was bleeding. At first he could say nothing. He stood there in the midst of them, tearing at his heaving chest with his red fingers. His eyes were horrible, bulging bubbles in his sunken, sweat streaming face.

"They—got—Hunter! Blew his head to spatters!"

He sank down on to the nearest cot. His body shook. His head rocked in his bloody hands.

"Where was it?" Piggot said calmly, standing over him.

Breen looked up vacantly. There was an awful grimace in his white face. The tears and sweat mingled, driving deep, wet lines in the red dust that covered him.

"What the hell do you care? We stood 'em off there, at the ford."

He began to curse Piggot with low, monotonous curses that came with his sobbing breathing.

"You beat it. You knowed what we'd be up against crossin' there, you yellow dog robber!"

All eyes were now on Breen and the man they hated. Something had happened. Something rotten. Piggot had let Breen down, somehow. Just as they knew he'd let them all down one day.

"What's all this?" Moylan said. "You hadn't oughta talk to the platoon commander that way, Breen. What's he mean, Sergeant Piggot?"

A new voice spoke. A man from far down in the corner of the room lurched to his feet and walked down between the bunks, staring at Piggot.

"Piggot," he said. "Who the hell's Sergeant Piggot?"

Everybody looked at the man. He wore a cook's white coat, greasy and smeared with dirt, over his undershirt. His coarse, red neck rose hairy and corded into an ugly jaw. His uncombed black hair hung almost into his narrow eyes.

"Get back on the line," Moylan said. "Get back to your rifle."

The man screwed his face up into a sneer.

"I don't have no rifle," he said. "Who's this guy, Piggot, givin' orders around here?"

He stood in front of Piggot now. His big hands worked against his thighs.

"You been drinkin'," Moylan said. "Lemon extrac' again." He raised his rifle menacingly. "Git back there on the line, I say."

The man laughed hoarsely.

"You in command here?" he sneered.

Moylan turned dangerous eyes toward Piggot.

"Will I cold cock him, Sergeant?"

"*Sergeant!* Ho, ho! That's a good one!"

He laughed drunkenly, uproariously, waving a finger in Piggot's face. Then he turned to the watching men.

"Lookit, buddies—you see that guy there? Calls himself Piggot, eh? Sergeant Piggot! Well, when I knowed him last he was a bloody shavetail. No damned good; left his outfit get hacked to hell by a bunch of Moros while he was skulkin' in the cogon grass stinkin' drunk. That's the kind of a guy you got for platoon commander. Dirty 'fraud-and' under a false name what was tried by a general court in the Islands, bobtailed and sent back steerage on a transport. Hell, even the chinks aboard wouldn't talk to him, they tell me."

Exhausted by his tirade, Fanchon drew in deep gulps of the close air. The men lay, half turned on their sides, stunned into silence by the blasting words. Fascinated, they watched Piggot's slowly whitening face. Even the dumbest among them could read the guilt written there.

Out of the stillness Breen raised his voice in querulous protest:

"Somebody put a tourniquet on me—I'm bleedin' to death."

"Fix his arm," Moylan said to a trooper. Not once did his eyes leave Piggot.

"You're in command," Piggot said to Moylan. "You should put me in arrest. I'd rather take a rifle, though, until it's over. I'm an expert."

Moylan moved a step nearer Fanchon. His eyes held a hard, animal-like glare.

"Get back to your rifle," he said.

Fanchon backed down the room, the men's eyes following him.

Breen's voice arose in a wail. He was crying out as the man turned the tourniquet on his swollen arm. He stared around the room with bulging eyes.

"What you guys waitin' for?" he said. "They got Carson and they got Hunter. Now they got me. They're comin' down from the upper ford—hundred of them. Get to your horses, you damn fools, and ride for it. You ain't got a chance cornered here."

His words carried complete conviction as did the horror in his face. Panicky words broke out, racing from man to man. Bunkies conferred with quick looks, scraps of breathless words. Men leaped from the floor. Those nearest the rear door packed in a mass, the closest tearing at the heavy wooden bar.

A heavy fire broke out from the river side. Under cover of the momentary distraction from inside the barracks, the wily men of Valdes had thickened their firing line and now were blasting the face of the building with accurate and controlled musketry. Day had come. The loopholes stood out, stark targets against the low sun. Bullets ripped through them now, thudding against the opposite wall, wailing in wild ricochets from the odd bits of metal they encountered.

PIGGOT looked at Moylan. It was his show now. Instantly, his own soldier sense leaped to the two things that might stop that crazed rush of men. In the brief second that he stood there watching he weighed them in his mind. Call out, give them a chance to understand; if they wouldn't, shoot down the big man at the bar. For this moment, he had become the mob leader. That, or personal appeal . . .

A man went down, struck by a bullet from behind. Sensing this, the others tore more furiously at those in front of them. Time to act, Piggot thought. A few more of those and they'd be beyond all reason.

Moylan, brave, all thought of self forgotten, yet made the fatal mistake. Recruit instructor days had left their ineradicable mark on him. He cursed them, bawling at them like awkward men at foot drill, like louts on the picket line. Words and curses that rolled over them in a mere dim mist of familiar jargon. He had played his hand—anything else would be simply an anticlimax of heroics.

He turned a ghastly, suddenly white face on Piggot, the bloodshot eyes blank, impotent. He read the question in Piggot's eyes and nodded stupidly.

Piggot was a big man; and like the rest he was as hard as a boxer before a championship fight. On the instant of that nod from Moylan he leaped. The fury of his movement tore all before it. He beat and threw men from his path like a raging wrestler. There was left the hulking private by the door. Already he had lifted one end of the bar. Only the surging mob behind him had prevented him from completely ripping it from its slots. At the feel of Piggot's hands on his throat, he turned. Like a cornered beast he backed to the door as though defending a last hope.

"Get back!" Piggot said.

The man lashed out. The blow caught Piggot on the shoulder, spinning him about. Men's hands tore at him now from the rear. He loosened his right hand and struck with all he had. The man gasped and sagged to the floor. Piggot turned his own back to the door. His feet shot out, thrusting, kicking, driving them back by cruel blows in the stomach and groin. Moylan, capable at last now that he was shown the way, sprang forward and stood shoulder to shoulder with Piggot.

In that momentary look that had passed between them had gone forever Moylan's hate and lack of complete subordination. A wild, fierce loyalty had replaced it.

"Stand back, ye cowards!" he screamed.

He flicked back the safety of his rifle. He held it close against his side, the muzzle poking straight into the feverish faces. Piggot had drawn his pistol. He stared from face to face, the weapon swinging with the movement of his wrist.

"I'll kill the first man that comes forward," he said.

They drew back, watching the men by the door.

"I didn't want to have to use this," Piggot said, lifting the pistol up before his eyes.

A man, hidden behind the others, said—

"Somebody shoot him!"

Nobody answered. They stood very still, their eyes roving, instinctively looking for other ways out, their minds beginning to work stupidly. They were waiting for a leader.

In the sudden hush that had come little sounds became significant, loud. The slow dripping from a shattered oil lamp pattered on the hard earth floor. A lopsided bunk creaked as a man laid his weight against it. From the river bank came the muffled, distant reports of the Mexican rifles.

A high pitched, beseeching voice shrilled out broken words. Corporal Breen, far beyond the panic of men, cried out in delirium.

"Somebody shut him up," a man said.

"You've got a wounded man there," Piggot said. "You going to run off and leave him? Hasn't he got a bunkie?"

"I'm his bunkie," a man said truculently. "I ain't leaving him, see?"

"Get back to your posts," Piggot said.

"Who says so?" a voice asked.

Moylan came to furious, screaming life.

"I do—"

"Oh, you!" They were not impressed by Moylan's words any more.

Breen kept up a monotonous, toneless flow of talk. He was like a drunken man obsessed with a drunken whim that nobody considered worth listening to.

"Shut him up," the man said again.

"You won't shut me up," Breen said, with a sudden, surprising lapse back into clear headedness. "Show me the guy who'll shut me up."

Odd, their standing there, idle, with terror at their backs, to listen with surprise to a delirious corporal come back miraculously to sanity. Mob psychology there, too.

"Piggot's in command. He's still platoon commander as far as I know," Moylan said.

"No," Piggot said. He held up his arm, showing them the three lances of darker cloth on the shirt where the stripes had been. "No, I'm not a sergeant. I'm not anything."

"Then get the hell away from that door before you get a slug in the guts," some one said.

"You ain't denyin' what that cook said, are you?" a man directly in front of Piggot asked.

Piggot looked from face to face.

"No," he said. "Moylan told me to take charge until this is over. I've had more experience than the rest of you, that's all. I told the colonel I'd stick. You'd never make it now in broad daylight. They're going to send a troop here."

"Blah!" a man sneered. "Take charge, then. Leave us get out while the gettin's good. You heard what Breen said?"

The crowd surged forward at these words.

"*So help me—*" Moylan muttered, and he slipped his finger inside the trigger guard of his rifle. "I'll do it, men!"

Piggot worked his tongue over his cracked lips.

"Steady, Paddy," he said. "You know what day this is?" he said to the men.

One of them jeered.

"Fourth o' July. We had all the fireworks we wants today, thank you."

"I can't stop you," Piggot said. "I'm just a 'fraud-and'—just what the cook said. I let down an outfit once—that was on the Fourth, too. I'm not doing it again. I can't order you—you're all better men than I am, I guess. Go ahead; pull out if you want to."

A DRY, choking feeling had come into Piggot's throat. He couldn't say anything more. He stood aside from the door, pushing Moylan gently away.

Nothing he could have done would have bewildered them more. Somebody had to make the first move toward that door. And nobody seemed capable of taking the initiative.

Breen, propped up in the bunk nearest the door, began to curse. Then he began to laugh, hysterically. He pointed at Piggot.

"See that guy, men?"

The man who said he was Breen's bunkie stepped forward.

"Cut it out, Jack," he said soothingly. "I'll get you on a horse. You can make it with me holdin' you."

"Get the hell away from me," Breen screamed. "I ain't goin' off on no horse . . . See that guy? That Piggot? Well, I got that guy wrong, what I mean. First I thought he was lookin' out for his own hide—but he's stayin'. He said he was, didn't he?"

"Leave him stay," the bunkie said. "They'd oney send him to Leavenworth if he did make it back."

"I ain't leavin' him," Breen said hoarsely. "He cracked a spick sentry over the can an' got me an' Hunter outa hock over there in Palomas where Valdes had us hog-tied. He done that single handed while you yeller bellies was over here layin' on your bunks."

The men looked at Piggot. They remembered now their sergeant's mysterious absence, Moylan's report of what must have happened to Breen's patrol, the Mexican rig Piggot had come back in.

"Go on—beat it," Breen yelled at his bunkie.

"I ain't goin'," the man said sullenly. He picked up his rifle and moved slowly toward the front of the room.

Fanchon pushed forward, facing Piggot.

"No delirious guy ain't kiddin' me," he said. "Come on, men. Let's go."

They moved toward the door. Piggot picked up Breen's rifle where it lay against the cot.

"All right, Moylan, Hardin—let's get on the job. They'll be rushing us—"

Without looking back, Piggot moved to a loophole, slipped to the prone position on the floor and threw off the safety catch of the rifle. The men, grouped about Fanchon, looked into each other's eyes. It came to them that they were leaving three men here to die—all of their noncoms. They had a chance to get back, scattered fugitives, to their regiment. What would they say to their colonel—their captain—the men who would crowd about them, eagerly questioning?

A man close to the door said—

"Guess I'll stick along with you, Paddy."

Moylan, halfway across the room, said phlegmatically:

"O.K. Get on that machine gun there."

The man walked awkwardly toward the abandoned Benet Mercier gun that was shoved through an aperture in the wall at a corner of the room. He stood looking down at it. Some of the others watched him.

"Can't one man work that there," he said.

"Leave my gun be—handle the belts if you wanta. But don't go messin' around that gun; you'd oney jam her."

The gunner strode forward, his face as concerned as a mother warning off an impertinent stranger from her infant's go-cart. Piggot squinted through the narrow hole in front of him. The fire from the Mexicans was still perfunctory; but he could see the bolder of Valdes' men working up into the brush on the near bank. He began to fire carefully. He could hear the man who said he was Breen's bunkie and Moylan firing close by. The machine gun nearest him began to shake, sending its sullen chatter through the room. He felt a current of hot air behind him. Fanchon had opened the door.

"Come on, guys," he heard Fanchon call out.

"Oh, to hell with you," a man snarled. "You ain't even a decent cook."

There was a concerted scraping of feet on the dirt floor. Out of the corner of his eye Piggot could see men dropping to the floor, thrusting their rifles through the loopholes. The room roared anew with the sound of their firing. He slipped his arm from the rifle sling. He rolled, half on his back, watching Fanchon, who stood alone by the door. The man stood there, undecided, unnerved by this sudden and bewildering defection of the others.

Fanchon saw Piggot watching him. He screwed his ugly face up into a ferocious grimace.

"To hell with you, Piggot," he said furiously. "I'll leave them have the dope about you when I get back to headquarters."

The men kept on firing, paying no attention to Fanchon. Piggot rose slowly, wiping his hands on the sides of his new breeches. He walked toward Fanchon. Some of the men turned to watch.

"Leave him go, Piggot," one of the men called. "The lousy pup."

Fanchon saw what was behind that grim look in Piggot's face. He twisted up his mouth, trying to maintain his bravado.

"You said yourself—you said any one could go," he muttered.

"I didn't say *you* could go," Piggot said.

"You heard him, guys; you heard what he said—admitted he was a crook an' a coward an' wasn't nothin'—not even a private now."

"We heard him," Breen said, surprisingly loud. "He's a liar. He's in charge of this platoon as long as it lasts. Am I right, guys?"

"Dat goes wit me," a man said. Others agreed.

"To hell with all of you," Fanchon said.

He turned and started through the door. Piggot leaped before him, blocking the way. The next instant they were fighting savagely. And about them, as though crowded ringside seats roared to their battling, the rifles of the platoon banged out.

It was any kind of fight. No rules here. And the men, firing there, bitterly resigned now to seeing this thing through, understood. With the primitive code of their kind, they realized that justice of a sort was being worked out. That Piggot had a soldier's right to vengeance. What happened to this new man, who was willing to leave them all and save his hide, they cared not a tinker's dam.

Only Fanchon's desperation kept him on his feet at all. He was no match for the cold, calculated ferocity of the better trained Piggot. It was over in a minute. Fanchon slammed hard against the wall, crumpled, and lay still beside the wounded man's bunk. Breen spat in his face . . .

THE first edge of night. Breen's moaning, sometimes eerie screams, made it harder on them. There were others wounded—not many, because the Mexican hits had to be through the loopholes, and the head got it first. Those others were quieter; some were even still lying stubbornly by their posts.

Moylan had got it earlier in the day—cleanly between the eyes. They carried him carefully into the storeroom, instead of laying him beside the others near the end of the room. After all, stripes still meant something . . .

Piggot came back into the room. He stood in the storeroom doorway, staring down the long squad room. In the dim light from the lantern on the floor, he counted those that were left unwounded. Ten—if you didn't count the gashes made by close ones across faces, necks and shoulders.

He'd just finished counting the horses left on their feet. You could see the picket line from the storeroom window.

"The saps," he called cheerily. "Didn't have sense enough to plug the horses. Thought they had us; they could use them . . . Well, men, most of them are on their feet out there."

The men turned haggard, grimy faces toward him. A new eagerness was in their eyes.

"When do we go?" one of them gasped.

"Soon," Piggot said softly. "Not much ammunition left. We wouldn't have had a chance in daylight. As it is, it's every man for himself. Some of you'll get through."

"Some of *us*," a man near him said, looking curiously into his face. "Ain't you goin'?"

"There'll be wounded left you can't take. I can talk their lingo. Maybe I can get a break for the wounded," Piggot said quietly.

"The hell with that," somebody growled. "They's only four. I reckon we can carry 'em. I'll take Hardy."

Only a few shots came now from outside. The Mexicans, evidently sure of their prey, were cagy about rushing into that deadly fire. It was almost silent in the squad room. Every cartridge of the few remaining counted.

"I'm staying," Piggot said.

There was a long silence. Stupid with fatigue, their minds milled about, thinking, thinking back . . .

"Count of that speel the cook got off?" somebody asked.

"Yes—that," Piggot said.

"We ain't kickin', are we? We never said it. How about it, guys?"

He looked questioningly from face to face. Some of them grunted. One man laughed a little hysterically.

"You so-and-so," a man next to Fanchon said, clenching his hands in his face, "say you was rotten lyin'!"

Fanchon was a pitiful sight. They had dragged him up to serve at one of the now silent machine guns. He was bloody, frightened.

"I was lyin'," he said thickly. "I done the looie wrong. I got drunk on him—I got the men drunk. He fought like he's fightin' now, oney a lousy pistol in his hand."

There was a long silence in the shack, broken only by the occasional thud of a rifle shot from outside. Fanchon rubbed his dust encrusted face with his hand. He leaned more heavily against the wall.

"I knowed you was lyin'," the man next to him said.

"He wasn't lying," Piggot said.

"Oh, what the hell's the difference?" a man asked querulously. "We all knowed plenty 'fraud-ands' in our time. Now we got the subjec' up, take a look at me, guys."

"Me, too," a voice sang out.

"An' me—"

Piggot laughed. The laugh caught in his throat.

"Hell," he said. "You birds are always braggin'."

"Remember," the first man said, "this ain't official. Any guy goes spreadin' the news when we get in—"

"O.K!" They laughed.

"Here's one, won't," Fanchon said. He tried to make the words facetious, but they ended in a groan.

"Let's go, men," Piggot said.

They lifted up the wounded men, quarreling as to who was to carry them. The bunkies got first choice. That was their law. They stood by the rear door. The bar was down, the horses a short hundred yards away. They could see the new stars blinking through the partly opened door.

"Easy, now," Piggot said. "I'm going with you on the strength of that O.K. Unsnap the halter shanks—spread out—ride like hell!"

"Good guy, Piggot!"

"Where's that loud mouthed cook?"

The loud mouthed cook was lying grotesquely, his open, sightless eyes staring at the wall. Their eyes shifted briefly over him as a man pointed. The man said—

"Well, he won't make much of a witness now."

Piggot couldn't be sorry; Fanchon had died better than he deserved. He stepped softly out of the door, holding his hand up against the background of stars for silence. Significant sounds in the now quiet night told him the Mexicans were working up from the river bank. Naturally, they augured from the American cessation of fire, that their ammunition was out. A quick finish now . . .

"Listen!"

Piggot stiffened in his tracks. The troopers behind him instinctively raised their rifles to the "ready". The unmistakable sound of pistol shots came from the direction of the river. A faint, pulsating beat, growing ever louder, made a sinister undertone to these scattered shots.

"They're comin' in mounted—cuttin' us off!"

"Quiet!" Piggot snapped.

"They'll stampede the horses. We ain't gotta chance if we don't beat it now," a man muttered.

"Put the wounded inside. Mount quietly," Piggot said.

THE faint note of exultation in his quiet words aroused the men to action. Their instant and unquestioning obedience to his orders thrilled Piggot even more than the certainty he felt as to the character of those new sounds by the river.

They mounted silently and drew their pistols at his command. The Mexicans paid them no heed. A panic seemed to possess Valdes' men. In the dim light the Americans could see them swarming back across the ford. Rifle flashes stabbed against the background of the

hills as the Mexican reserve covered the withdrawal of their assaulting lines.

"They're firing to the flank," Piggot said. "They never thought of danger from across the river."

Wild, excited murmurs arose from the men. For long hours they had taken it, seen their bunkies smashed down before their eyes. Now they were on their horses, where they belonged. The tide had miraculously turned. They had pistols in their hands. They were filled with bitterness and ugliness that had festered in them as they confronted almost certain extinction. One of them shouted:

"Let's go! Let's get the dirty spicks!"

"Steady," Piggot warned them. "In this light you look like spicks yourselves. Do you want your own men to ride you down?"

"You think it's the troop, Sergeant?" It was almost a madman's voice, breaking with excitement.

"Nothing else but. Listen to those pistols."

A roar of fire now arose on the other side of the river. They could see the Mexicans leaping into their saddles, groups of them galloping back toward the far hills. And now a thin, dark, fast moving line, streaked with bright spurts of flame, swept in on the panic stricken men of Valdes. There were still some Mexicans on the near side of the river.

"They's comin' this way!" a trooper cried. He jerked at Piggot's arm. "Lookit! Tryin' to make a getaway, thinkin' we've pulled out."

Piggot realized that the man was right.

"As foragers—pursuit to the river only—follow me!" he said.

The men screamed with vengeance as they followed his galloping horse. Stumbling and crying out, the Mexicans rushed blindly, seeking escape in the mesquite. No use to tell his men to give quarter. Their pistols were already raging behind him. The Mexicans fired bravely but impotently up at the rushing horses. A few got away. Most of them were pistoled or ridden down ruthlessly.

At the river bank Piggot assembled them. They were laughing, cursing. They were happy. They sat their horses and watched the madness in the night across the ford. The troop, easily recognizable now by the silhouettes of the men and the whipping guidon, had swept completely through the Mexican last stand. They could hear the commands of the officers to assemble. The triumphant shouts of the men.

"Some one'll get hell for crossin' that river."

"Who in hell will ever know?"

"All right over there?" a voice called from the other side of the stream. "We got your friend Valdes."

Piggot lifted his head proudly. He looked at his ten men.

"Right as rain, Captain," he shouted back to the mounted man who had waved across to him.

"We picked up a spick post by the upper ford. They spilled the beans. We came as fast as we could. We're relieving you, Piggot."

Piggot laughed hoarsely and mopped the sweat from his brow.

"I'm ready to turn over, sir," he said.

They went back to the littered barracks. They lighted all the lamps they had. In the strange brightness they smoked and looked curiously at each other. A new, common pride lifted their tired faces, made them self-conscious and silent. Their eyes avoided their dead. All but one . . .

The man who had made Fanchon say he was a liar stood over his body and looked down at his staring eyes. He turned and saw Piggot watching him. A sheepish look came into his face. He moved away.

"Well, they got that talking cook, Smith," he said.

"*Smith, eh?*" Piggot said. He grinned ruefully, looking from one to the other.

"Funny what a bunch of 'fraud-ands' will do, isn't it, guys?" he said.

A Story of the Louisiana Bayous

FISHERMAN

By JAMES MITCHELL CLARKE

THE sun, rising behind the island to the east, sent a flush along the dark bayou, as a swarthy woman blushes. Noel put his paddle inboard and stood up, eyes intent on a movement below the surface. Twelve feet of hollowed log shivered and dipped under him, but only for an instant. Noel caught a balance, held it, moved his feet until he stood the way a lumberjack rides a log. The pirogue rode quietly on water flushed with dawn.

Noel had a coil of light, well used line in his left hand. It was attached to the center of a net, which he now gathered in careful folds. His eyes never left the water where movement showed. Suddenly his arm swept out and a circle of brown cast net spun through the air. It dropped flat on the water and sank, weighted by the lead pellets around the outer edge. Noel hauled in on the line, and a moment later the net, folded like an umbrella, came over the side with a dozen small fish flopping and gasping within.

For an hour he drifted along the low lying landward island, casting and casting again. He enjoyed this fishing. Even at seventeen he could use the cast net better than most grown men—and Louisiana fishermen learn the trick as cow country boys learn to use a lariat. He liked the early morning out here, too. On the big island where the houses were, birds and fish were disturbed by people and boats. Here, where the only sign of habitation was an old brick cistern, rem-

nant of a house long since abandoned, the fish came as if there were no men. Also, the fish would bring money, and he needed money for a certain purpose.

And the wading birds, herons and cranes and egrets, came also. As Noel fished past the mouth of the little cove where the cistern stood, a tall blue heron waded in his wake, keeping him company. He felt friendly toward this bird.

The sun rose up and set on the easterly island and Noel drew in his net for the last time. It was very still as he coasted easily around toward the anchorage. Unusually still. The fishermen, whose boats should by now be filling the air with their engines' sound, were lazy today.

But when he rounded a brush covered point Noel saw that they were astir. Fortuné Colette's skiff with three men in it was stopping by another boat and its crew was coming off. Other skiffs were pulling down the bayou. Noel ceased paddling to stare in wonderment. All the men were leaving their boats. Not an engine was running.

Then Fortuné Colette stood up, waving his arms wildly. His voice came over the water, shouting French.

"Noel! Are you crazy? Come away from that island! Come out of there fast, I tell you."

Noel took a leisurely stroke and Fortuné's shout came again.

"Hurry, little fool! Come away from there."

Still Noel didn't understand, but to please the man he dug at the water and his canoe shot forward. The others were yelling at him too, calling him stupid, a child without sense, telling him to make all the speed he could.

When he came alongside, they cursed him, but their faces showed more concern than anger.

"How long have you been over there?" Fortuné wanted to know.

"An hour. I went to fish some bait for you—"

"Then you don't know. Thank God you got away in time. There is a maniac on that island, *cher,* one who is mad. It is that Austrian from Barataria, Lieb, who has killed his partner and run over there to hide. He is drunk and he is crazy. He would have killed you like that—" Fortuné snapped his fingers.

"That big man who has come to fish shark?" Noel asked. "Is that Lieb?"

Fortuné nodded.

"We are going to the store where the sheriff will be. That man has to be caught before he kills somebody else."

"You will not go and fish shark, Fortuné? I have caught you some bait."

"Throw it overboard! Is this any time to talk about bait and fish?"

The skiff moved off, leaving Noel to jettison his morning's catch. It was no use to save them if no one was going to fish. They'd spoil.

His swifter pirogue caught up with the skiff and he reached the landing ahead of them. In Garfield's store, which sold everything from soap to anchors, half the men on the island were gathered. Every one, it seemed, was talking at once—except Old Man Garfield himself. Noel saw him sitting behind the counter where he always sat, stroking his gray mustache with a mahogany hand and looking out on the excited, gesticulating men with the calm of an idol.

FOR half an hour confusion held the crowd. They were waiting on the sheriff. Old Man Garfield would probably tell him what to do, but it was Big Picot's job to organize a posse and go after this murderer. From the talk around him, Noel learned the story of the killing. Lalo, the New Orleans creole whose shark skin shipments to shoe manufacturers in the North kept a dozen boats busy, had gone aboard Lieb's boat to see why he had not delivered his cargo. Lieb and his partner had been drinking for about twelve hours, and the Austrian was ugly. He accused Lalo of trying to cheat him, grabbed him by the neck and threatened to wring it as he would a chicken's. He seemed about to make his threat good when his partner interfered. Whereupon

the Austrian stabbed him with a skinning knife and made off to the island, taking his shotgun.

The scene was very vivid to Noel. The Austrian towered on legs like tree trunks. His hands were big as paddle blades, and his strength was tremendous. Lalo, in his grasp, would have had no more chance than a chicken. He could see in his mind the Austrian's mouth, thin and down curved like the mouth of a shark, and his round, protruding blue eyes.

Suddenly a laugh, harsh and not kindly, started near the door and spread through the crowd. Word passed from mouth to mouth.

"Big Picot has run away. He heard about Lieb and took his brother's boat. He is afraid."

This was a thing the fishermen could not forgive. A man might use discretion and stay at home when a southwester, whipping the Gulf to a smother, might pile a boat on a bar or rock. But to run away from his job was another thing. Picot would have a bad time when he came back.

Lalo came pushing his way through and stood talking to Old Man Garfield in low tones. Frank, Garfield's eldest son, joined them. Noel could see their lips move and their hands, but though the men grew quiet he could hear nothing that was said. Finally Garfield nodded his head and spoke. Lalo turned to the crowd. He addressed them in the English of South Louisiana, which is scarcely odder than the French spoken there.

"Frank will take a posse after this Austrian. He will take six man. What one will go?"

There was a little clear space around Old Man Garfield's chair. Into this Noel stepped. His voice, still high and thin because of his youth, carried to the ends of the room.

"I'll go, me."

The laugh that followed stopped Noel dead. He felt the blood leap up burning into his face and ears. He wanted to crawl away and die. He wanted to weep. But when Augustine Mouton, the island wit, called, "You can go alone, Noel! He would like a baby for eat, that Lieb," he wanted to fight them all. He turned facing them, deep black eyes shooting fire.

"I will show you how I'll do! If any man wants for fight—"

Fortuné Colette shoved him back with the flat of his hand.

"This job is for men," he said. "You make yourself a fool, Noel." He went to offer himself as one of the party.

In a moment Noel was lost in the swirl of men pushing forward to volunteer. He tried to get near to Garfield's chair, clamoring to be taken. They paid him no attention at all, now, and that hurt worse than the laughter.

Finally, when the six had been selected and the room was quieter, Lalo took him by the arm.

"We go to work now at the sheds. Because a man die is no reason for not work."

All the way down to the skinning sheds at the other end of the island Noel was silent. The other men in the truck taunted him, repeating Augustine's joke, offering him their guns, and much advice about how to deal with the Austrian. They could get no word out of him, and even after the joke had worn itself out, Noel's thoughts ran hot.

It had been like this for over a year now. He was a man, but they wouldn't let him have a chance to show it. They knew he could handle a boat and take his place at trawl net or seine, hand lines or cast net, as well as the next. But when hard or dangerous jobs came up, he had to stay at home. As a boy, at a boy's wages, he had been welcome to go on any boat. Now even his brother would not take him.

That was the worst of it—that and Estelle. Since the slim, dark eyed, curly haired girl who had been his sweetheart and companion as long as he could remember had become sixteen and a grown up young lady, she had no use for boys. A man who had a big oyster boat and lived up near New Orleans had been

showing her attention. Noel owned nothing but a shotgun with a wired lock, a pirogue and a cast net.

If Luis, his brother, would only give him a partnership in the sturdy old trawl boat their father had left them, he might have a chance. He would be a man then, able to make money and entitled to some position in the island world.

But Luis would not. He kept putting Noel off with excuses. He was too young. He did not know enough, was not strong enough. A partner should be another full grown man. Their mother needed Noel ashore to help her with the cows and chickens. In short, Luis still regarded his brother as a little boy. Also, there was the matter of money, an obstacle almost insurmountable. The old *Rosita* needed a new engine, and Luis was waiting until he could find a partner who had enough cash to fit her out.

Noel, with the inability of the very young to see when he was beaten, had taken this job skinning sharks to earn that money. It would take him, at the rate he was able to save after giving his mother what she needed, something like two years. But Noel shut his mind to this, and endured the heat and terrible stench of the skinning sheds.

THERE was little work done. They ripped at the tough hide mechanically, pausing often to stare across the narrow bayou to the low scrub oak on the landward island. Somewhere over there was Lieb. More than an hour had gone by since they left the store. Frank Garfield and his six men should be there by now. To Noel's straining ears every sound was loud, the clink of the knives, the plop of a shark liver thrown into an open tub. The cry of a fishing gull. Across the point, Wong Gee, the shrimp buyer, stood on the end of his wharf, watching.

Two shots, lazy and unreal as firing always sounds from a distance, came drifting over the water. The men stopped, knives poised in their hands, then began to run along the shore toward Wong Gee's wharf. Noel, younger and more agile, was soon ahead. As he ran he heard firing break out with a steady, angry sound. But when he stood beside Wong Gee he could see nothing. The fight was hidden by the scrub oak over there.

The firing kept up for perhaps five minutes. Silence settled again, more intense than before. The shark skinners moved about uneasily, straining their eyes for some movement that would tell them what went on. This stillness stretched until Noel felt his body grow tired with the strain of waiting. When shooting started it was a continuous crackle, as if the men were firing slowly, each taking his time. The heavier boom of Lieb's shotgun could be distinguished from the rifles. It kept on for a full half hour. When it died it went out in a ragged spatter of shots. There was no more sound.

"They got him!" some one said, but none of the men went back to work.

They were all crowded at the end of the pier, looking far down the bayou to where a boat would have to cross to the store landing. That was the way the posse would come back. Again the hot, silent moments piled one atop the other. The skiff did not appear. Twice the time it should have taken elapsed.

When it came out of a brush hidden bayou almost opposite, the watchers grew silent after their first exclamation. Even from this distance Noel could see that the skiff was loaded to the gunwales. It moved straight toward them and presently he could count the men. Six. They were all in this boat but one—and Lieb. Though the sun shone on it, Noel felt his back grow cold.

As soon as the skiff came within hailing distance, they began shouting questions from the wharf. The posse did not answer. Noel recognized Fortuné Colette at the oars and Frank Garfield in the bow. The chill along his back went away. Fortuné rowed steadily, with long, even strokes.

Down below, others had been watching. Lalo's truck came roaring down the road and half a dozen more men streamed out on to the wharf as the skiff came in. Frank Garfield was first up, a smear of blood showing across his cheek. He grabbed Lalo by the arm.

"Get your fast boat! Michel Dumont is bad hurt."

Willing hands were already lifting Dumont out of the skiff. When Lalo's cruiser took him aboard he was unconscious from shot wounds in the abdomen, but still breathing. Frank Garfield, very grim about the mouth and eyes, drove the others back to the store in the truck.

If little work had been done that morning, less was accomplished in the sheds during the rest of the day. They discussed the fight from beginning to end, worked a little while, and began all over. It was the old cistern which had upset the posse's plan and so nearly cost Dumont his life. The seven men landed at various points on the island and moved through the scrub oak with the idea of flushing Lieb out like a rabbit. By the time they reached the cistern they were in a crescent, surrounding it. Lieb had let them come close, shot Dumont and scratched Fortuné Colette before they could take cover. Frank Garfield had crawled out and brought Dumont in with Lieb's fire cutting off twigs all about his head. But he had not been able to bring Dumont's rifle. Now Lieb had two guns, and his position in the cistern was so strong that he could stand off all the men on the island indefinitely.

Again that night the store was crowded, and every man had a plan of his own. Fortuné Colette was for surrounding the landward island and starving Lieb out. Some one else suggested dynamite, of which there was none on the island . . .

ALL this was merely talk. In one of the back rooms Old Man Garfield was holding a council with Frank and some of the wiser, cooler heads. It was they who would make the decision. Noel stood in the place he had occupied the night before, watching and listening. He felt very lonely and very young. These men argued and planned and made their boasts as if he did not exist. He was out of it as much as if he had been a woman. They thought he was of no use. A year ago it would not have mattered. He would have been excited, have dreamed vaguely of taking a gun and going out for Lieb, but known that it was impossible. Now he felt that his place was beside them. He belonged to the company of men—and they would not let him in.

It was long before the conference in the rear broke up. The two Garfields made their way behind the counter. The others joined the crowd. By the time Old Man Garfield was seated in his chair the room was hushed. Frank, standing beside his father, said:

"I'm going out after Lieb tonight, and we've decided that I'd better go alone. If more than one goes, there will be more chance of making a noise. I'll go by myself and catch Lieb asleep. One shot will do the business just as well as a dozen."

A murmur ran around the room, half approval and half objection to the risk. They liked Frank Garfield. His father was the richest man among them. Frank was educated, the friend of prominent people in New Orleans. But he remained as much an islander as themselves, talked their language, put on dungarees and did the labor of his father's business as if he had never been away. They admired him for wanting to go alone after Lieb, but they did not want him killed. In the end they waited on his father's word.

Old Man Garfield, looking more like an idol than ever, nodded twice. It was settled.

The family men started home soon, coming up in little groups to shake hands with Frank Garfield and wish him luck. When Fortuné Colette came, a low voiced argument started. Fortuné talked earnestly, emphasizing what he said with quick moving hands. Noel edged closer.

"We can't do that," Frank said, cut-

ting Fortuné short. "If we wait any longer he'll steal a boat and get away to the mainland. Once he got up into Barataria nobody'd ever lay a hand on him. You know that, Fortuné."

There were tears in the big fisherman's eyes as he shook Frank's hand. Noel remembered Frank's saying that Fortuné had taken him on his first hunting and fishing trips.

Noel's brother and Augustine Mouton came up to say goodby. Luis turned to Noel.

"Come on," he said. "It's time you were in bed."

"I'm going to stay here, me," Noel said, "till Frank comes back."

"You are coming home! You have make a fool enough of yourself for today. Why should Frank want a boy like you to hang around?"

Augustine Mouton winked at Frank, who had stopped to listen, and nudged Luis.

"Maybe Frank will take him along. Noel is a brave man, him!"

Luis growled—

"He is one fool and when I get him home I'm going to slap his face, yes."

The blood leaped up again into Noel's neck and ears. Luis was reaching for him, and he was going to hit his brother.

But Frank Garfield elbowed Luis aside and faced Augustine Mouton.

"When we called for men to go after Lieb, Noel was the first to say he'd go. I didn't hear some of you say anything at all, Augustine. Your mouths are bigger than your hearts. Let Noel stay, Luis."

Before Frank's steady look, Augustine's eyes dropped. He turned and made for the door. After a moment's hesitation, Luis stalked after him. Frank Garfield had always been a hero to Noel, and always the storekeeper's son had been kind to him. Now, if Frank had asked Noel to cut off his right hand, he would have done so cheerfully.

At midnight, half a dozen men made their way silently down to the landing. Old Man Garfield did not go to see his son off. His two hundred pounds made walking difficult, and he was the kind of man to know when his job was ended. Having lent his wisdom to the plan, he now left its execution to those who were more able. Mrs. Garfield had wept a little, but offered no objection to Frank's going. The decision of her men was final, not open to question.

As Noel watched Frank's dim figure step into a pirogue and shove off with a long push pole, he remembered again the Austrian's size. Frank was not above medium height. He did not appear very wide or thick. But his clothes and perfect proportions hid a powerful frame and heavy, corded muscles. He could throw any man on the island in a wrestling match. In a hand to hand encounter, even Lieb would have a hard time with him. Frank was a good shot, too.

The dugout disappeared noiselessly into the dark and five men trailed back to the store. On the way they met Fortuné Colette, who had been unable to sleep while his friend made this expedition. The bandage covering the scalp wound on Fortuné's head gleamed white in the darkness. They answered his questions in whispers. Their feet crunched on the shell road softly.

IN THE store, Noel found a chair and tilted it back against the wall. Only two lamps were kept lighted and these made grotesque shadows—shadows of men grown to giant size, queer shapes that grew from sacks of potatoes and coiled rope. In the hot quiet night the smells of coffee and hemp and tallow and burning oil blended queerly.

Gradually Noel felt his first tension of waiting relax. The others relaxed too. They moved about the room to talk to each other, sat on counters or chairs to smoke. The sharp rasp of a lighted match was loud, its flame bright. Only Old Man Garfield sat still, like an idol, eyes half closed.

Each time Noel looked at the clock he was startled that so little time had

passed. Ten minutes seemed an hour. When, at last, half an hour was gone, he began listening for a shot. Another half hour passed. The men, now, were all silent. Noel could hear Frank's father breathe heavily. But he always breathed heavily. He was fat.

The men began to look at one another, looking questions; but for awhile nobody spoke. Then a little wind came up, rustling dry palm fronds in the yard.

"Near two hours he's been gone," a man said. "We should hear some shot, yes."

"He's waiting for his chance," Fortuné Colette said. "Frank is no fool, him."

Even when three o'clock came and nothing had been heard except the island night sounds, Noel could not believe that anything was wrong. The others kept telling themselves that Frank was all right.

"He is waiting till he get a good chance," they said. "He waits till Lieb is sleep sound, then he will shoot. Pretty soon we'll hear him."

"Maybe he will take him alive," somebody suggested. "Frank would not shoot a man asleep."

When the chill that comes just before dawn crept into the room, Fortuné Colette could stand inaction no longer. He went quietly out and down toward the landing. The rest followed, leaving Old Man Garfield in his chair.

They stood a long time, staring toward the landward island. Stars wavered in the dark water. Stars burned low over the island, big and bright as lamps. A garfish made splashing sounds and a night bird was calling somewhere. But of Frank and Lieb they heard nothing, could see nothing. Silently they trooped back to the store.

"We didn't hear Frank come," Fortuné said.

From a dark shadow behind Garfield came a low sob. Noel had not known that Mrs. Garfield was there. The old man stirred slightly.

"He won't come back at all," he said. "Something has happened to Frank. I will give one thousand dollar to the man who will go and get that Lieb."

Noel felt a tightness in his throat. What the old man said so simply was the thing he already knew, but which his mind had refused to accept. Something had happened to Frank. He was not coming back. Out there in the dark that shrouded the landward island, Lieb had killed his second man.

Why was the room so still? Why did these men all look away from one another, and away from Old Man Garfield? Why weren't they already starting out to get the man who had killed their friend? Frank's father had offered a thousand dollars to the man who would do this thing any of them should be glad to do.

Suddenly it came to Noel that they were afraid. Lieb's great size, his fierceness, and the two failures to capture or kill him had whipped these fishermen. They were now on the same level with Big Picot and Augustine Mouton.

For the second time Noel was on his feet, speaking to Old Man Garfield.

"I will go, me. I'll get that man who has kill Frank."

From the dark Mrs. Garfield cried "No!" and Fortuné Colette reached a big hand to pull Noel back. He collared him gently.

"No, *cher*. Do not be crazy." Fortuné turned to Garfield.

"It is no use to have more mans lose their life. We will keep a watch on that island. When he get hungry and thirsty —"

"He will steal a boat That man is without fear and he is smart. He will get away unless we stop him soon. Isn't any man brave enough to go? I am old and fat—"

Garfield sat as always, the picture of mountainous calm. But Noel could see the sweat standing on his brow and knew what agony was within. Frank, his first born son, was dead—murdered.

Noel suddenly twisted from Fortuné's grasp. He was at the door before the fisherman called sharply, "Where do you go?" Noel did not answer.

The path he took ran along the rear of the island where the incoming tide gurgled in the creeks of a salt marsh. He could float off his pirogue now without trouble. That was Noel's first rational thought. Till this moment he had only been filled with a great driving rage, a desire to punish this man who had killed Frank. Now that rage cooled and hardened into resolution.

He felt suddenly grown up, old, older than all the men, the same age as Old Man Garfield. He looked back on his offer to go with the posse that morning and knew that it had been a boy's impulse. Tonight he felt differently. He was not going to make a showing before anybody else. He didn't care if any one knew of it. He was going because of Frank.

A GREAT calm was on him in which his mind worked surely and swiftly, as it had never worked before. He knew that he could do this thing. How, with a rusty old gun, that sometimes fired and sometimes did not? With Luis' gun? Luis would wake and stop him before he got out of the house. A jumping fish splashed in the dark, and the answer came to Noel as clearly as if a voice had spoken. He smiled into the dark and went swiftly down the familiar path.

Behind the house his pony whinnied as Noel took from under the cistern his paddle and the fishing gear he had used nearly every morning of his life. He slipped off his shoes and walked down through dew wet grass to the road across the marsh.

His pirogue made less sound than a garfish as it moved through the paths of reflected stars. He saw on his left the yellow lights of the store, on his right the low lying bulk of the landward island. He rounded its end, fifty yards offshore, came in to shallow water and used his pole which made even less noise than the paddle. Hardly a twig rustled when he ran her in among the overhanging bushes of the bank.

There were many things which Noel, because of his youth, did not know. One of them was what waiting does to a man. He did not know that the prospect of death sets condemned men screaming rather than death itself; that brave troops go to pieces when held inactive under fire. He thought that the clear, reasoning drive of his purpose would carry him through to the end.

But, as light crept through the darkness turning it gray, his imagination began to work. He thought of Lieb, towering on his great legs with immense hands dangling. One hand, they said, had gone clear round Lalo's throat. He moved swiftly, too, this big man. He had stabbed his partner so quickly the onlookers hardly had time to blink. And he was cunning. He had tricked the posse into a bad position.

When Noel began to wonder what had happened to Frank Garfield out there in the silent dark, he tried to shut the thought from his mind. Already he felt himself shivering. The cold drops formed on his forehead. His new found maturity deserted him. He was a boy again, young, slight and alone; facing the huge Austrian without even a gun.

Noel's hand inched toward his paddle. He snatched it back. He was here, and his plan was good. He would not let himself be scared away. But the impulse to flee was strong. His hand moved against his will, touched the paddle before he drew it back. He thought of Frank, of Old Man Garfield, of Augustine Mouton's taunt, of Estelle, who thought of him as a boy. These were reasons all strong enough to hold him to his task. But one by one fears, creeping through him like a chill, overcame them and sent his hand toward the paddle.

The light had grown stronger now. As his hand gripped round the wood convulsively, he saw for the first time a thing caught in the bushes, tugging to get free in the wash of the tide. A log, he thought, and knew that it was not a log. His eyes, dilated and staring, could not move from it. He dropped the pad-

dle and, hand over hand, pulled the dugout along toward the brush.

He seized the object and turned it over. Frank Garfield's face, already beginning to bloat from lying in the water, looked up at him with eyes open. On the neck, great black bruises made by fingers showed how he had died.

For a long time Noel sat there looking at Frank's face. Then he dropped the body and knew that he would never be young again. All feeling within him had turned to cold, hard stone.

A rim of gold showed now along the eastern island. It was time to go. Close beside the bushes his pirogue slid along. The bank hid him from the island side, and clothes and canoe blended into the brush so that he could hardly have been seen from the water. He made no sound at all. Where a point jutted out a little, he stopped and held the canoe by a bush.

In front of him stretched fifteen feet of open water. If he rounded this point, he would be in the cove, directly in front of the old cistern. But Noel was not going to round the point. He stayed where he was and inwardly cursed at the breeze which now sent small waves to lap against the dugout.

The sun had showed its rim and sent a million points of light sparkling on the water behind him when Noel heard a rustling in the brush. He did not stand up to look. He would not risk that. Then came the fall of a stone. It came to Noel that Lieb must have slept out in the brush and just now had come back to the cistern. That must have been the way he killed Frank, by letting him come to the cistern, then falling on him from behind.

Noel's eyes scanned the water ahead. At any time, now, the help he expected might appear. It was not human help, or an act of God. Noel was depending on his fisherman's knowledge of this island shore. He was waiting for what had taken place here half the mornings since the island first grew brush.

Suddenly he stiffened. From the other point of the cove a blue heron came wading; perhaps the one Noel had seen yesterday. The bird came slowly, neck hunched, feet lifting absurdly as the legs—hinged opposite from a man's—bent forward. Once or twice his beak jabbed out, missed.

Then a shotgun roared from the island. Lieb did not miss. The bird beat the water wildly with blue wings and lay inert. Heavy splashing footsteps came toward Noel, whose breath had stopped. A moment later the Austrian was standing in full view. He turned his head to look up and down the shore, shotgun ready in his hands. It seemed, in that instant, that his protruding blue eyes looked right through the screen of brush that hid Noel.

But the big man stooped swiftly, gathered in the bird, and turned his back. Instantly Noel was on his feet. In his left hand was a coil of light line. His right held the carefully gathered folds of his cast net. Over the bank he could see Lieb's great head and shoulders as he strode toward shore.

NOEL cast. The circle of brown net spun through the air, dropped. Its whirling motion whipped it round Lieb, clear to the waist, pinning down his arms. Noel jerked with all his strength. The pirogue overturned.

He could not see whether his jerk had upset the man or not, though he heard the shotgun roar. The foliage was in the way. And for a moment fear clutched at Noel, holding him motionless. He forced his leg to move. Then he was running, the line in his hand.

Around the point, Lieb lay prone in shallow water, struggling and bellowing like an alligator. His legs threshed the surface and his great shoulders heaved so that it seemed he must surely break through the mesh. Unless stopped, he would be free soon.

Noel saw that the shotgun lay in the water, useless. He dived for Lieb's legs. As the Austrian threshed he was lifted

up, thrown from side to side. His face dipped into the water and mud, blinding him. But he hung on and somehow managed to take a turn round the kicking legs. Standing up, he drew the rope tight before Lieb kicked him sprawling a dozen yards away.

When he got up, Lieb was on his feet. He had stopped cursing, now, and his protruding eyes glared at Noel from the net. It was still fast about him, but his hands were working deftly. In an instant one arm would be free. There would be no more Noel.

For one split instant it was touch and go with Noel whether he would run or try to get the Austrian. Two impulses, battling within, held him motionless. Then, like a flash, he had scooped up the trailing end of the line and drawn it taut. For the second time Lieb fell, sending up mud and white water.

Noel was careful, now. Dodging those lashing, kicking feet, he used the Austrian's own struggles to help him get one half hitch after another about his legs. He took them about the knees, where they would weaken the man most. When the rope grew short he threw himself once more across Lieb's legs and knotted it fast—and as he did so Lieb's knee caught him alongside the head and knocked him over again.

He got up groggy but hard eyed. There would be no more of that. Lieb's struggles had carried him far from his gun. Noel picked it up from the mud and brought the heavy barrel down on the Austrian's head. He hit him twice to make sure. Then he got the skiff from near the cistern and hoisted him aboard, using an oar for a lever.

Rowing slowly, he had his back to the big island. An inarticulate shout made him turn his head. A pirogue with two men in it was dashing toward him. They were Luis and Augustine Mouton. Luis was calling him names. He told Noel he ought to be locked up in the house; that he was too crazy to be allowed out. He said he was going to smack Noel for making trouble. They had been hunting him for hours—ever since Fortuné Colette came with news that he was gone. Then Luis saw Lieb's inert body wrapped round with the cast net and stopped with his mouth hanging open. Augustine Mouton looked very foolish as he stared.

Fortuné Colette and some other men came up in a skiff. They all shouted questions at once. Noel did not answer. He said:

"Go and get Frank. He is over there."

Noel jerked his head toward the landward island and went on. The little wharf by the store was crowded till it creaked. Other people lined the shore. It seemed as if the entire island had come down to watch.

As he climbed up to the wharf the people parted to let him pass, and he saw Estelle. The man who owned the big boat had his hand on her arm, but she seemed unaware of it. Her eyes were on Noel, beautiful with a look he had never seen before. Noel, holding himself very straight, walked on. The people were all silent, looking at him. It didn't matter. What anybody thought or did was of no importance at that moment, even Estelle.

Old Man Garfield was waiting for him, and Noel saw that there were tears in his eyes. He had never seen emotion in that calm, heavy face before.

"I have brought that man who killed Frank," Noel said.

Old Man Garfield put his hand on his shoulder.

"You are a good boy, Noel. You have done good. I have promised—"

"Mr. Garfield, I have not done a thing for pay!"

The old man looked at him searchingly. His thick mahogany hand tugged at his mustache

"That is true," he said "A man is not brave for pay. But I owe you a debt, Noel. In my shed is an engine Frank bought for a trawl boat. Frank will not use that engine now, and you are a fisherman, you. In the *Rosita* it will work good."

WHADDYUH SAY?

By BERTON BRALEY

WHADDYUH say? There's a party starting
To dig for treasure a pirate hid;
And another bunch that is soon departing
To quarry kings from a pyramid;
There's a rumor of gold in the barren Gobi,
Talk of gushers in Borneo,
Ivory trading in far Nairobi.
Whaddyuh say? Let's go! Let's go!

Whaddyuh say? Are you sitting pretty?
Are you waxing wealthy and getting fat?
Well, the wandering roads are rough and gritty
And you probably wouldn't care for that!
Whaddyuh say—there's a spark within you
That still has rather a ruddy glow,
And you guess you're ready to stretch a sinew?
Whaddyuh say! Let's go! Let's go!

Whaddyuh say? When a gamble offers
There's always a gang that'll shoot the works,
Risk whatever is in the coffers
To bet on Destiny's whims and quirks.
Is it flying or trekking that's on the docket?
Is it tropic jungle or Arctic floe?
Or a leap to the moon on a flaming rocket?
—Whatever the odds on the dice they throw
There's always a bunch who will follow their hunch
Saying, "Whaddyuh say—Let's go!"

Beginning a Two-Part Novel

CHAPTER I

FUGITIVE

THERE were three men in the small chamber outside the private office of the chief of departmental police, in the prefecture building at Oran.

One was the native guard, a white bearded, dignified Arab wearing a row of service medals. Seated beside him on the long, hard bench facing the window was a massive, red faced man of forty, who from his clothes and his shoes belonged to the Sûreté, or detective bureau.

The third was a civilian. He stood before the window, looking down into the sloping, cobbled street twenty feet below. He was not remarkably tall, nor disproportionately wide across the shoulders; there was no evidence of large muscles beneath the beautifully cut gray tweeds he wore. But his straight back, the set of his head on the wide neck, the suppleness of his body, revealed perfect control, radiated a fierce, untamed energy, a disquieting sense of ruthlessness.

Yet when he moved to reach into an inside pocket, his entire torso shifted awkwardly. The afternoon sun streaming through the panes suddenly gleamed on a slender steel chain binding his wrists. He contrived, nevertheless, to bring out a gold case, which he snapped open to remove a cork tipped cigaret with his lips.

"Light, please—"

The detective hesitated, then rose to cross the room and offered a lighted match.

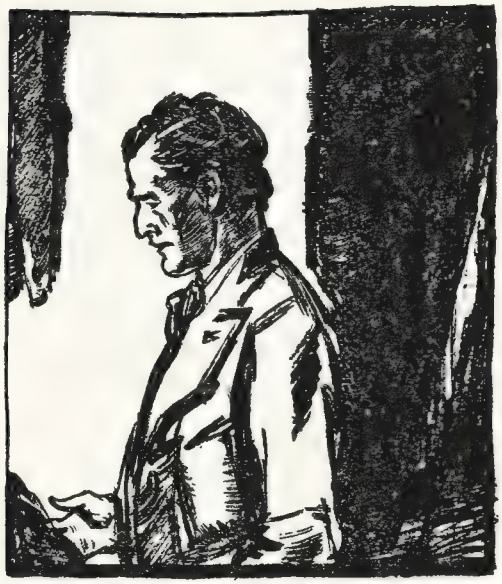
"No smoking here," the native guard said loudly.

"Sorry, old chap," the prisoner replied without turning, "but what can be done about it?" His voice was deep, vibrant, definitely pleasant. "I'm under arrest, as you may have noticed, consequently I am nervous. When nervous, I smoke."

"But the chief—" the Arab started.

"Leave this gentleman alone, Makh-

of the Foreign Legion



GUEST OF HONOR

By

GEORGES SURDEZ

louf," the detective advised. "He is not an ordinary prisoner."

"Thanks," the man said.

"Smoke all you wish to, monsieur."

"Again, thanks."

The prisoner turned to smile upon his guard and his face came into view. The profile was magnificent, evoking the bronzed purity of certain old medals; there was superb determination in the set of his jaws, in the sharp, straight line of the nose, in the firmness of the shaven lips. His hair was very thick, so black that it shone in the sun like the feathers of a black bird, brushed back to bare a high, wide forehead. His glance was hard, piercing, contained that same impact of cold, ruthless latent strength that marked his whole personality.

Even the detective, accustomed to treating prisoners casually enough, appeared impressed and vaguely awed. He smiled gratefully, and rearranged the gray felt hat, the tan gloves, the silver handled English walking stick of his captive, resting on a nearby table.

"I'll sit down again, if you don't need me," he said at last. "My—"

"Your feet are sore," the prisoner said. "That's the privilege of an ex-*gendarme*."

"Isn't that a fact? I've known more policemen than you have."

"I don't believe that possible, old chap. So far as I have been able to observe, North Africa is entirely populated with agents of police. Not that I don't esteem the profession."

He turned and looked out of the window again.

It would be an easy matter to open it and leap out. The handcuffs offered no serious problem; he had broken such things on bets many times. But the metal circles would remain on his wrists. And he might break a leg and be recaptured immediately. Moreover, he did not believe that he had anything to fear, counted the handcuffs as a personal inspiration of his guard. This had happened before, and he had always man-

aged debonairly to bluff his way out.

The massive door opened, and a small, dark man, meek and furtive as a hare, appeared.

"If Monsieur Mercadier will please come in—"

"At once."

The detective followed Mercadier into the inner office, a spacious room with dark paneled walls and thick carpets. Heavy chairs were lined against the partitions, the center was occupied by a large mahogany desk, behind which stood a giant of a man, with a broad, tanned, mustached face under a shock of graying hair. Mercadier knew at once, from his bearing, that he was facing a former officer of the regular army.

"Good day, Major—"

"Chief of Police Vallars," the big man corrected. "Retired major—war promotion . . . " He stirred uneasily, flushed as he saw the chain. "I'm dreadfully sorry about that."

"It seemed unnecessary, I admit."

"Chief, my instructions were to use all precautions in securing the person of Monsieur Mercadier," the detective said. "I have them in writing."

"What was meant, probably, was discretion," Vallars retorted wearily. "Remove the handcuffs, Bourquin, and retire. I wish to see this gentleman alone."

He settled back in his chair, fingered the papers before him absent mindedly, until Mercadier had been freed, and the detective had left with the secretary.

"You may sit down if you desire."

MERCADIER brought a chair before the desk. He sat down, reached out to bring an ash tray within the right distance of his cigaret, crossed one leg over the other. Of the two, he appeared to be the more at ease.

"Thank you for your courtesy, monsieur."

"Don't mention it. You are Pierre Mercadier?"

"That is my name."

"You are thirty-three years old, born at Namur, Belgium. You served in your country's army throughout the war, as private, corporal and sergeant. You are without a profession—"

"I beg your pardon." Mercadier lifted one hand in a gesture of polite protestation. "I'm an *agent d'affaires,* a business broker, interested in many undertakings in Algeria."

"You will note—" Vallars smiled in a friendly manner—"that I am sparing you the customary, tedious questions of identity by reading from documents concerning you. Aware, naturally, that they are altogether false. Do we agree?"

"Naturally—not."

"I know that your name is not Mercadier, and that you are thirty-two years old, born at Lons-le-Saunier, in the Department of Jura, in France."

"Again?" Mercadier smiled patiently. "I've had that story told me so many times that you'll forgive me for being a trifle bored with it. However, the police being the police, I bow."

"We are rather clumsy—at times," Vallars granted. He pursed his lips, consulted the papers again and resumed, "Under the name of Mercadier, you have been taken into custody by the police of various North African cities—Casablanca, Algiers, Constantine, among them."

"Released each time with apologies," Mercadier said.

"You know why?"

"Yes, I know," Mercadier answered with assurance. "Because a mistake had been made each time. My business dealings were always such as could pass inspection, honorable. My very success is what brings local competitors to seek an occasion to smash my credit in this vague story. Here in Oran, although I do not doubt that my arrival was signaled to the police within a day, nothing was said, nothing was done, until I proved a dangerous rival. You have before you a letter which, I gather, accuses me. Is it not signed by some gentleman in the same business as I am?"

"Yes."

"You have heard nothing against me from any one else?"

"No," Vallars agreed. "As a matter of fact, although your real identity was suspected, nothing would have been done by us. We have watched you for four months and your affairs have been aboveboard. But with a complaint against you, the law is the law, and we must act. Until our hand was forced, we closed our eyes to several irregularities: your traveling with false papers of identity—we understood that you could not travel under your own name—and the illegal wearing of decorations—" he indicated an array of narrow ribbons ornamenting Mercadier's button hole. "Both serious offenses."

"My papers are not forged," Mercadier declared, "and I was awarded these decorations."

"You won them. No one questions your courage. But you won them not as a Belgian sergeant, but as a captain of French infantry. They were taken from you when you were disgraced and expelled from the service—taken away by due process of law."

"These are Belgian decorations—it was not within the power of the French government to deprive any one of them."

"Then you are French, an officer?"

"Not at all. What makes you think so?"

"Your own words—that the French government could not deprive you—"

"Note that I said 'any one'," Mercadier corrected. "I am a normally intelligent man and this conversation has occurred several times before today. I may add without flattery with less charming persons than you are. Therefore, knowing whom I was presumed to be, I conceded to argue your point for a moment"

"Very strong, very neat." Vallars nodded admiration. "I know that you were a captain in our army. I have had the honor to meet, during the War, your father and your brothers."

"My father is dead and I have no brothers."

"Your reply is half correct," Vallars said, stiffly. "Both your brothers fell in action."

"Pathetic," Mercadier said, ironically. But this time the ready smile did not flash with ease. Something evidently had happened to his nerves; his fingers groped on the edge of the desk.

"You deny them?"

MERCADIER rose to pace the floor. But he recovered his poise with the extreme mobility that he showed in all his actions.

"I deny your right to question me," he said. "I have been publicly humiliated, brought before you in handcuffs, to listen to an endless recital of past errors made by the police in my case. You wear my patience thin speaking of things I can not understand. Make it short: Why have I been arrested?"

"As a fugitive from justice."

"You shall discover upon investigation that I am indeed Pierre Mercadier. But that will not prevent my business standing in Oran from being ruined, and compel me to move elsewhere, to have this same comedy repeated once again, very probably."

Vallars nodded thoughtfully.

"You have protected yourself well, I admit. So well, in fact, that the police of other cities could not hold you, would not even run the risk of detaining you until witnesses could be sent from France. But this time, you are caught."

"No—I am the victim of a resemblance," Mercadier snapped. "That business of my identity was thrashed out in Algiers, in Constantine. Investigation at Namur proved I was Pierre Mercadier."

"The description of the man we seek tallies with yours perfectly," Vallars added. "And this time, we have evidence to hold you. A few weeks ago, here in Oran, you took as your secretary, Mademoiselle Yolande Demars."

"She was broke, and I helped her by giving her work," Mercadier declared.

"Her education warranted it."

"You were poorly repaid," Vallars concluded.

"How?"

"Yolande Demars having access to your private papers, she supplied the accusers with these documents—" Vallars lifted a few papers into view. "Your real birth certificate, army papers. Surely, you shall not ask me to look upon your possession of these as pure coincidence?"

Mercadier shook the ashes from his cigaret. He did not change color, did not blink, but his face seemed to freeze in a mask of intense, bitter self-derision.

"A woman," was his laconic comment. He added, "In that case, you have me, monsieur."

"Therefore, in the name of the law, I arrest you. You are Pierre Raoul de Sarges, former captain of infantry, condemned by default by the First Tribunal of the Seine, in April 1919, to two years of prison, according to Article 309 of the Penal Code. Charge: 'Intentionally inflicted blows and wounds resulting in a sickness lasting more than twenty days.' "

"You know the circumstances, monsieur?"

"Yes," Vallars admitted. "Most of us do, and that is why the burden of proof has always been thrown on your accusers everywhere. Now, no matter how deep my sympathy may be, my duty allows no leniency." He rose and came around the desk. "Serve your two years, and start anew. A man such as you can do it."

Mercadier stared at the hand offered him, whitened.

"I do not accept charity. But thanks for your kindness."

"As you wish." Valars smiled sadly. "I understand you better than you think. We're all clay, my son." He threw the door open, called out, "Bourquin! Here's an order, signed and sealed. You are to escort this gentleman to the prison, with discretion."

Detective Bourquin rattled the handcuffs in his pocket.

"Shall I?"

"Mercadier," Vallars said, "your word of honor that you won't escape?"

"What will I use for honor?"

Vallars hesitated, his face flushing.

Bourquin opened his coat to reveal a service revolver in a holster at his belt.

"This is less annoying, Chief—and as effective if needed."

"All right. Goodby and good luck, Mercadier."

"Goodby, monsieur; many thanks."

MERCADIER picked up his hat, his gloves and his cane as he passed through the outer chamber. Bourquin had folded the order placing the prisoner in the warden's care, and put it in an inside pocket. Now that the arrest had been confirmed, there was no need for further politeness.

"Snap it up, Mercadier."

"Coming, Bourquin."

The detective led the way. Mercadier thought feverishly as they went down the stairway. He could not face prison, would not face it. But he was caught.

He knew he could knock down the detective, reach the street. But he recalled the revolver, recalled that, mild and good natured as Bourquin appeared, he would not hesitate to shoot, for his type have a rigid mentality that permits few hesitations. That is, unless he was severely hurt, which was very probable if he fell down the stairs, in which case Mercadier would have added another crime to his credit, which would translate itself in many years of penal servitude in Guiana. At best, wearing the clothes he had selected that morning, he could not hope to hide. He cursed his unpatriotic taste for English suits.

"Cigaret?" he offered when they reached the street.

"Yes, thanks, Mercadier," Bourquin accepted. A man bound for the city prison no longer merited a special title. "Now, to proceed discreetly."

They strolled side by side toward the tiny public place where they could board

a trolley car for the upper city of Oran, where the new prison was located. Mercadier calculated that he might chance leaping off the car, but that did not alter the factor of the loaded revolver—Bourquin might be a good shot. The way things had been going all day, Mercadier mused, it would be his lot to fall on a policeman who could shoot.

"I'll trust to inspiration," he murmured.

He looked at Bourquin and grumbled under his breath. To have been what he had been once, and to find it impossible to escape from a lone, obese cop!

The row of delapidated taxicabs near the fountain on the square gave him a plan. He came to a halt beside a closed car, piloted by a sleepy Algerian Spaniard.

"We could hire one of these," he suggested.

"Say, I have no funds to—"

"I'll pay, naturally. More private than the trolley."

"All right." The detective grinned

The chauffeur had gone forward to crank, after a vain attempt to work the self-starter. Mercadier stepped aside to let Bourquin get in, but as he had expected, the detective was cautious, and insisted upon his charge climbing in first.

"I have to obey you, haven't I?" Mercadier said.

He went into the cab first, sat down and reached out to help his guard with one hand, while he slammed the door with the other. The chauffeur had his back turned, shifting his gears, so Mercadier's gesture ended in an unexpected fashion. His left hand closed tightly on the detective's windpipe, while the right, launched with all the pent up energy of utter despair, knotted into a fist and struck Bourquin's jaw. Mercadier felt his arm grow numb.

"To the port," he called to the driver. "The Marseilles boat—leaves in fifteen minutes."

"All right, boss!"

Mercadier peered through the windows, glanced out of the isinglass plate in the rear. The other chauffeurs and the casual loafers showed no excitement, had seen nothing of what had occurred in the cab. And they rolled away, down the steep street.

Bourquin had collapsed in his corner, with an expression of absolute, vacuous peace on his face, eyes closed and mouth wide open. Mercadier wiped his forehead, smiling faintly. It had been an excellent idea to keep fit at all times. Eye and fist had backed his will precisely.

But the guard would recover soon, perhaps in a few seconds. Mercadier found the handcuffs, locked them on the detective's wrists with the chain passing under the knees. He stuffed the silk kerchief from his breast pocket into the gaping mouth, hesitated, searched his pockets. He forced an oblong match box upright between the yellow, solid teeth, jamming it so tight that the fellow could not have opened his jaws another millimeter to spit out the gag.

"He'll have a nice, stiff jaw when he comes to," Mercadier thought. He took stock of the situation; he must leave the taxi and vanish.

The cab was rolling down Charles-Quint Street, absolutely deserted at the time. Mercadier grinned. His luck had returned, and when he was lucky, no one luckier. A glance at the houses gave him an excuse for stopping: they were nearing the American vice-consulate, and the plate with the spread eagle was already discernible.

"Stop before the American consul's," he ordered. He was out on the sidewalk before the chauffeur had applied his brakes and, waving a hundred franc bill before his nose—"My friend will attend to the customs while I finish business here. Drive him down, let him off at the gangplank and hustle back here. You can do it in five to ten minutes, and I can just make the boat."

"That's a hundred francs," the chauffeur said, "and it will total only thirty or thirty-five."

"Make change and we'll fix it up later."

Mercadier held on to the bill to keep the driver's eyes where they belonged and shouted into the back of the cab, "Don't lose my keys, old man. Go on, driver."

The taxicab leaped away with unexpected speed, rattled savagely, and swung the corner into the ramp leading down to the docks Mercadier lighted a cigaret, crossed the street and climbed the long stairways leading up the high bluff, through the public gardens, to the city. Far below, he recognized the taxi, swerving to avoid heavily laden trucks, slowing down to a crawl.

"Five minutes before the taxi reaches the ship," Mercadier mused as he ascended the steep flights," five more before they free my friend, get him to talking. Five for them to reach a telephone, and five to put the call through to Vallars—never expected to find any reason to like Algerian phone service—and endless delays later. I have more than a half hour before there is a general alarm. Let me see—where is the last place they'll look for me? In my rooms at the hotel, obviously; consequently, I'll go there."

CHAPTER II

THE CRIME

THE man who had become Pierre Mercadier had clung to one tradition of his family: no one went to prison for a common law crime. If one could not escape, he lodged a bullet in his skull.

For several generations there had been from three to six men of his name serving in the French army. His father had been a general, his older brothers officers. He himself had been a sub-lieutenant at the start of the World War, having earned his stripes to the rank of sergeant in the Colonial infantry, and his commission at Saint-Maixent, the infantry school.

Pierre had one quality that surpassed all others: he was exceedingly brave, a born soldier. His sharp speech, his independence of character were condoned, forgiven. He was daring without being rash, and his bravery and skill became a legend in his division. In succession he was awarded all French decorations, became a Knight of the Legion of Honor at twenty-two. The green and red ribbon of his War Cross lengthened to make room for more and more stars and palms. And as the chances of war brought his regiment in contact with Allied armies, his name was always included among those of men whom it was excellent policy to honor. He had thus added Belgian, British and Russian ribbons to his collection.

He was wounded three times before the end of hostilities, was the sole surviving officer returned from one of the Verdun counter-attacks. The illustrated newspapers published his photograph, and he knew a period of fame. Convinced that he would not outlive the struggle, that his life would be cut short, he had enjoyed life to the full during his infrequent leaves and his periods of convalescence.

The Armistice surprised him.

He knew dark days from that moment on. In the army, reorganized on a peace time basis, he found men who disliked him, from envy or honest disapproval of his ways. His father was in comparative disgrace, having led a division into a trap some time in 1917, when the Germans were rather well informed of what the French planned. His two brothers, who were higher in rank, had fallen and he missed their protection.

Pierre wished to resign, but desired an occupation that would suit his taste. He spoke of his intentions to his father; with some financial backing he could start a plantation in Indo-China. But he discovered that his father was almost completely ruined. Sound investments had proved more foolish than the most daring speculations. Steel mills had been destroyed by the invaders, coal mines flooded, wrecked. Russian bonds—a placing of capital recommended by the French government, for had not Russia been the great ally and

a good risk, with its one hundred and eighty million people?—were now worthless.

The father advised him to remain in the army for a year or two, stating that he hoped to recuperate from compensations to be paid property owners from the expected German indemnity. Pierre had obeyed.

He had believed, like many others, that with the end of hostilities, the world would be thrown open before those who had served well; that wounds, decorations would count. And he was sickened at heart, discouraged, by the swarm of officers which suddenly reappeared from behind desks, from small troop depots, who scuttled forth like insects out of every seam and crevice of the immense military machine that had functioned behind—far behind—the trenches.

Pierre was astonished that these gentlemen, who had been comparatively safe, wore seven service chevrons as he did, were decorated.

Never a silent man, seldom cautious, he expressed his opinions freely. There was overmuch of the Don Quixote in him; he broke many lances against bureaucratic windmills. His superiors, even those who had known him in the trenches, grew tired of his explosions and he was transferred often. He wandered from regiment to regiment, admired by many, hated by more.

Early in 1919 he was appointed second in command, as a captain, to a major in charge of a large stock of war supplies taken over by France from the American Army. He was told that the task was nominal, that he was as a matter of fact a sort of human rubber stamp, a figurehead of the army in a business handled by civilians.

Pierre had never liked paper work. Moreover, he believed that dishonesty was something encountered only in a few abnormal beings, who showed the evidence of their error in their faces. He was accustomed to signing documents he did not read. At the front, he had been too busy with effective work to bother with details, and had signed papers mechanically as they were presented by his quarter-master sergeant. He knew, naturally, that no army carried on without some amount of grafting, but of a type so rooted in traditions that there was no stigma of dishonesty attached. But such graft was limited, he believed, to sergeants. Commissioned officers were above suspicion.

HIS readiness to apply his name at the bottom of any paper was soon noticed. The major brought him piles of vouchers, as did other men, from sergeants upward. When he entered his office, he would sign busily until the piles on his desk were gone. He was bored with the job, and wrote letter after letter asking for transfer to a Colonial regiment, to see active service in Morocco or Syria.

The major sent for him one morning, informed him that his stocks were depleted. Thousands of blankets, mountains of automobile tires, cases of canned goods by the thousand lot, were missing. Pierre was shown vouchers he had signed permitting the removal of the stuff, and told that according to the law he was responsible.

He retorted that the major knew best who had drawn up such documents and refused to argue the matter at length. But a delegation of officers called on him in his rooms in town, and retired after a solemn conference, leaving a loaded revolver on a table. As a man of honor, an officer, Pierre was presumed to blow his brains out before morning, to avoid a trial and scandal.

His disgust was so intense that he was tempted. He did not fear death. But he saw that suicide would be a tacit admission of guilt in the eyes of all, and in no sense a solution. Truth, he felt, would out.

He insisted on facing a court-martial, tried to prove his innocence. But there

were the signed vouchers, legal proof. He was but one of many officers accused of like slips, some of them not blameless, against whom the newspapers were carrying out a vigorous campaign. Military men understood his actions, and he was not sent to prison. He was stripped of his rank, dismissed from the army as "unworthy of bearing arms." Automatically, the Council of the Legion of Honor at Paris deprived him of military decorations when notified of the sentence.

He pleaded, protested, in person and by letter, tried to interest some one in his cause. But even his father was not wholly convinced of his absolute sincerity. He told Pierre as much in a brief interview.

"Today, it is a bigger crime to be a fool than a crook. You signed, didn't you?"

"I thought you would understand," Pierre said. "You were blamed unjustly for your failure, caused by spies in high places. You should know how I feel."

"I took the blame with dignity, quietly. Perhaps it would have been better to shoot yourself, after all. Change your name, enlist as a private and end somewhere—decently."

"Risk my hide again for a government that thanked me as it has?" Pierre laughed harshly. "Not much."

"You're a dead man," the father said wearily. He was an old soldier, and old traditions counted more than paternal affection. "Go to some other country, to a colony, vanish. And I prayed you might be spared after the others were gone. How little one knows! You can have ten thousand francs . . . "

"Use it to settle my debts. Goodby."

Pierre clung to hope for some weeks, visited newspaper offices, plagued editors. His only consolation came from the clumsy letters of faith sent him by his men, the soldiers who had served under his orders during the war. They offered him their meager savings, and granted him unquestioning loyalty. None of them was wealthy; he could accept nothing. But he knew days when he handled those notes and wept.

One morning, leaving the office of an afternoon paper which he had visited to tell his story over again to skeptical listeners, he met the major, the real culprit, strolling contentedly along the boulevard. The good fellow started, paled, then made as if to pass with a faint smile.

Pierre discerned irony in that quick grimace, and before he knew it he had planted his fist on the curving lips. Then something seemed to snap in his brain. When the other arose, spitting teeth and blood, he broke his walking stick across his shoulders. Pierre struck the reeling man again and again. To those who witnessed it without knowing the motives, the beating appeared appallingly brutal.

When reason returned, Pierre fled. And he was not remorseful when he read in the newspapers that his accuser had been sent to the hospital for treatment. But he had learned much of human justice and hid. Obtaining new papers of identity is easy to any one who knows the routine. Pierre inquired, and located a man who had been an orderly in a field ambulance during the war, and who had collected papers, with an eye to future business, from poor fellows who would no longer need them.

He was given the choice of several documents fitting his description, and he selected to become Mercadier, thus keeping his first name. The real Mercadier had died in 1917, the passport merchant had made the necessary investigations, and no trouble could be expected from an ordinary questioning.

Pierre had lost family, money, friends, even his name, and being sought for a prison sentence, honor as well. In France, many people knew him well—there were few cities without a garrison, and few garrisons without officers who would recognize him.

North Africa, which he had visited before the war, in which he had served

with the Colonial army, attracted him. Pierre dressed well, had excellent manners and spoke several languages. After two years of apprenticeship with a business agent in Tunis, he branched out for himself. He was successful from the first. But always, when all was going well, an envious competitor would pry into his past and end by warning the police.

In Oran, he had been left alone for a long time, until he had effected the sale of an abandoned marble quarry in Southern Algeria at a large profit. From that moment on, he had known he would be questioned, but had hoped that he would be able to allay suspicion. This would have been possible but for the betrayal of trust by Yolande Demars.

The girl had come to him at the small office he had leased on the Place de la République in a building tenanted mainly by steamship agents. Evidently well bred, she had told him a plausible story of misfortune. Pierre was off his guard, and had believed her. She had handled his mail in exchange for her expenses in Oran pending the arrival of funds from her family.

Now, he knew that she had been sent to him with a purpose. But it was a trifle late to learn.

CHAPTER III

YOLANDE DEMARS

PIERRE reached the Imperia Hotel in less than twenty minutes. The girl at the desk looked up, startled, but said nothing. She had heard, probably, that this handsome guest had been arrested at the Brasserie nearby at lunchtime, but was discovering that it had been simply idle gossip. Pierre answered her slow smile, asked for his key.

He reached his room on the top floor, scorned the handsome leather valises, but found a paper wrapped parcel in the closet, which he took under his arm. He hastily selected a few articles he liked particularly, went back to the hall, locked the door. His instinct warned him not to go down to the lobby, that he must gamble again, to find a place to change his clothing.

He made a decision promptly, turned an elbow in the long hall, halted before a door, knocked, then entered without waiting for an answer.

"Good day," he stated cheerfully.

Yolande Demars had been seated before her mirror, comb in hand. She was a very pretty, vivacious little brunette of a distinct Parisian type.

Her round, demure face was lighted by large sparkling dark eyes. The comb dropped to the floor, and her mouth opened to scream. But, first because she was too shocked by Mercadier's entrance, then because he smiled, she uttered no sound.

"They arrested me at lunch," he explained rapidly. "I know what you did, but—no grudge. We're all in business for what we find in it, and I was not paying you enough for loyalty, I suppose."

"You're not sore at me, Mr. Mercadier?"

"Can't say I admire you just now—" he turned to lock the door. "Careless—learn to keep yourself safe. Turning a key in a lock is easy when you have the leisure, embarrassing in an emergency."

Again, Yolande grew worried.

"What are you going to do?"

"Talk. You can help me, and I can help you. Forget what has been done. Gignon & Company hired you? I thought so—they were sore; second deal I plucked from under their nose. How much did they offer you?"

"Five thousand francs and my hotel expenses."

"So that's why you could afford the Imperia—" Pierre laughed. "I wondered a bit. To be nearer my quarters, into which you could enter by using the keys trusted to you? You're a sweet child, Yolande!"

"I was broke, and they told me you were a crook. If you weren't, why did it matter?" Yolande spoke with increasing confidence. "You're too wise to break my neck for playing with the cops. How would you like to be guillotined?"

"Death is death—but that would be horribly public and most embarrassing." Pierre grinned cheerfully. "I wouldn't like it, I fancy. But that's not the question. Have you anything against me personally, Yolande?"

"Against you?"

"Do you hate me enough to want to hurt me?"

"Hate you? I—I come damn near to loving you. You're the first man I've met since I was fifteen who's really proved a gentleman—"

"I don't make love to my employees, if that's what you mean—" he waved her aside with an easy gesture. "That's a sweet, truly feminine impulse to grant much to the man who asks nothing. But I've just beaten up a police agent and I must act quickly."

"I'll do anything, everything!" Yolande spoke volubly. "What I did, I had to do. I had to look out for myself."

"Women and children first, evidently," Pierre granted gently. "They'll be here, at this hotel, almost any moment now. But if you open your door to talk to them, they won't search it. When they see you alive, they'll know I did not see you. For according to the cops, the first thing I would do is strangle you for giving evidence against me."

"That's right," Yolande admitted.

"I'll hide in your closet."

"All right," Yolande approved.

"And in case you plan to give me away—"

"What makes you think I would?" she asked.

"Nothing in particular." Mercadier smiled. "But one never can tell. *Some* women are *so* disloyal. So listen: I have on me thirty thousand francs in nice, crisp, large bills. The commission on that quarry deal, you remember. Half of it is yours if I walk out of here free."

"They'll pinch me for shielding you!"

"Certainly, if you go and tell them about it."

"You wouldn't tell them yourself, if you were caught?"

"What good would it do me?" Pierre asked.

Yolande drew the silk wrapper snug around her short, trim, plump body, threw open the closet door.

"Fifteen thousand?"

"Fifteen thousand."

"Lord, how well you talk to a girl! Get in there."

Pierre held the closet door ajar an instant.

"If I'm nabbed—nothing."

"Don't worry!" Yolande shoved him back, closed the door securely and whispered through the crack, "That money means a millinery shop in the old home town—and my kid. I have a little boy, you know. Boarding on a farm—"

"You'll break my heart," Pierre mocked.

"Why will men believe anything save the truth? I told you I was twenty, brought up in a convent, and you believed me! At times, I had to hold on not to laugh right in your face."

"Yes," Pierre whispered back, "I laugh in my own face when I think of it."

"I cried a little and—" Yolande broke off. "Eh—it must be you they're paging. Keep still."

Heavy boots resounded in the halls, doors were opened and slammed. Pierre could hear the manager's shrill voice explaining.

"We can't phone the police every time a guest comes in . ... The girl at the desk thought there had been a mistake . . . Say, be careful in those rooms—the beds have just been made up . . . Yes, you've seen the roof and he isn't there! Is that my fault? What? Sure, he could have gone out without being noticed. We can't afford to hire members of the secret service for porters!"

YOLANDE'S dancing steps crossed the floor, the door creaked open. Mercadier found his hands perspiring, despite his confidence in himself. After all, Yolande might play the safe game and give him up.

"What's going on? Oh, there's a policeman!"

"You said it, there's a policeman!" Bourquin's voice resounded. "I nabbed your boss, Mercadier, and look what he did to me! He's beat it?"

"Escaped? Oh, heavens! He'll kill me!"

"Would you blame him?"

"He may be under my bed, in my closet, this minute!"

"When did you get back to your room?"

"I didn't leave. Had my lunch brought up."

"Then how could he be in here?"

"Yes, how silly of me!" Yolande laughed nervously.

"Wasn't bright," Bourquin admitted. "But he looks like too smart a man to get into trouble for choking you. You're not in his class. If you're scared, lock your door and phone if any one tries to break in. I'll let you know when he's pinched. We're watching the port and the railroad stations. He can't leave town. So long."

"Oh—couldn't you leave a man in here to guard me?"

"Eh?" Bourquin laughed loudly. "If I could, I'd name myself. So long, baby—and if you happen to see him, tell him to get in touch with me at once. He forgot his handkerchief—in my mouth."

The heavy boots clumped down the stairs, the voices dwindled. A key turned in the lock, and Yolande ran across the room to open the closet.

"Well, Pierre, what now?" She rubbed her fingers together in a charmingly vulgar gesture of greed.

"Not yet. When I leave."

"When will that be?"

"During dinner. The girl at the desk goes into the dining room to collect for meals, the maids, porters and guests are all eating. Nobody's in the lobby save the bell-hop at the phone. You call him, send him for a magazine, see?"

"You think of everything."

Pierre entered the bathroom with the paper wrapped parcel, emerged a few minutes later. He wore a cheap, wrinkled suit, the coat, too tight at the shoulders, too loose at the waist, buttoned over a worn pullover sweater. He wore a dingy green scarf instead of a shirt collar. A peaked cap seemed to thin his face, to accentuate the sharpness of his jaws.

"Think this will do, Yolande?"

"You look natural enough," Yolande admitted. "You may still have a heart of gold, but nobody'll guess it. Better keep that peak pulled low. Your eyes give you away—and your hands."

"Thanks," Mercadier said. He brushed his hands under the bed, rubbed them together, scraped the dusty palms with his nails. Yolande picked up manicuring scissors and completed the transformation.

They spoke little the rest of the afternoon. Mercadier finished his good cigarets, while reading magazines. At seven-thirty he rose, brought out his wallet. The large bills piled on the dressing table.

"Count them over," he invited.

"You're honest," Yolande said, concealing the bills. "Say, you won't tell anybody you hid in here, ever? Even if you're caught? I don't deserve it, but—"

"I said no grudge and meant it."

"You heard that man say they were watching the stations, the port. How will you get out of town?"

"I have—" he hesitated—"no definite plan. Something must be left to luck."

"You don't trust me, and you're right. When I'm scared I'd spill anything." Yolande wept a little. "I've written my address on this envelop. If you ever want to write me, Pierre—"

"Fine. Now call off that bell-boy. So long—"

He stepped into the hall, waited until he heard Yolande speaking, and started down the stairs. He halted on the first floor, until he knew that the boy had concluded his conversation with Yolande and had left. There were several persons in the lobby, none of whom knew Mercadier.

In a few seconds he was walking briskly in the street.

He turned right toward the Boulevard Seguin, tearing up Yolande's envelop as he walked. The girl was, after all, a very nice person, if untrustworthy in an emergency. The less she heard from her past when she had settled down, the better it would be for her. He hopped on a passing trolley, was lost in a crowd of workmen returning to their homes, all of whom were dressed very much as he was.

He decided not to stay in Oran even for a night. Like all French controlled cities, the place was extremely well policed, new arrivals checked up with great care. Informers teemed in the poorer dwellings. But how could he leave? The port was out of the question, the railroad lines well guarded. To walk out of city limits on foot, at night, was likely to arouse suspicion. To hire an automobile would be even more conspicuous and dangerous.

Two or three large motor trucks lined before a café in the suburbs crystallized a new plan. He hopped off as the trolley rattled on, and saw the drivers seated together in the nearby café. He went to the zinc covered counter, ordered a drink, then strolled casually over to a table and watched the game of cards absorbing the truckmen.

Soon they made room for him and he played awhile. The conversation rolled on. He found out that these men were bound for Oudjda in Morocco, across the frontier.

"I'd like to go there and see what it's like," he said.

"Then why don't you?"

"If it was only a matter of wishing—"

"Broke?"

"Not altogether." Mercadier looked at them, seemed to gain confidence. "You fellows seem regular comrades. Here's what happened to me: I went to a dump on the Rue du Monthabor, and I was minding my business. I'm from a ship, you know—the *Mascara.* Two Arabs came in and started to make cracks about me. Then they said I should buy them drink. Now, I'm not stingy and I don't mind buying drinks for anybody—"

"We know that—"

"But I hate to be forced into buying. There was a fight. I guess I banged one of them pretty hard. The cops may be looking for me."

All laughed.

"Looking for you? For smacking a *bico* at the *Moulin Rouge?* Why, that's no crime."

"Well, he was cut—"

"Listen, all they'd do is get a statement that you had acted in self-defense and kick you back to your ship."

"I can't afford to be questioned." Mercadier lowered his voice. "I was driving a truck in Avignon, and some old dame crossed ahead. Broke her hip, and when they found—her folks, I mean —that my boss couldn't settle much, they started a criminal charge against the driver—me. I've got six months by default, I read in the papers."

The chauffeurs looked at one another with understanding glances. It was their hard lot to earn their living driving trucks, and their bane consisted of careless old ladies. A bond of sympathy was established.

"Listen, you get on the roof of my truck, lie down among the bales, and we'll get you to Oudjda."

Mercadier brought out a handful of small bills, soiled, pasted and repasted, counted them.

"I have three hundred francs. I'll split with you fellows."

But they protested:

"We're not blood suckers, pal. Come on."

Mercadier followed them.

CHAPTER IV

NOSTALGIA

A FEW MONTHS later, Pierre reached the camp of Souk el Trad. After his escape from Oran, he had had little trouble in reaching Oudjda, and from there the old capital of Morocco, Fez. To obtain new papers of identity had been an easy task, and Pierre had not been suspected. He knew that his description had been wired to all seaports, but was aware that he was reasonably secure in the interior, the hinterland called by the French "Useful Morocco".

With the start of the Riff campaign, many strangers had flocked to North Africa and the presence of Pierre Salvadez, an Algerian of Spanish stock, born at Mascara, attracted no particular notice. Partly because he knew that his small capital would not last long, partly because he did not like to remain idle, Pierre had sought work.

He understood that it was impossible for him to start a business independently—such ventures need many dealings with town officials, and he did not wish to tempt fate. On the other hand, the better known, more solid firms looked into the past records of their prospective employees with great care. Pierre therefore was forced on the edge of strictly legitimate business.

He found a connection with a firm of Near East traders, Abednour Brothers. The Abednours had come to Morocco on the heels of the first columns, in the first decade of the century, with all their possessions in sacks carried on their backs. Both were now wealthy, flashily dressed, and rather well thought of in official circles. The Abednours profited by the needs of the moment, that was known. But they could be depended upon to produce what was required when other firms failed to meet requirements.

They had accepted Pierre's services, and were repaying him with a share of their profits proportionate to his investment of twelve thousand francs. In the space of a few months, Pierre had earned a considerable sum. The Abednours had no large offices, no warehouses of their own But their small, smelly place in Old Fez was the center of large undertakings.

Pierre, who had cut his hair in military style and wore such garments as might have clad a retired officer, was used as a contact man with the Abednour's bewildering group of business connections throughout Morocco — merchants, native traders, and a small army of paid informers who wired their reports in regularly.

In his hurried trips from city to city throughout the Protectorate, Pierre learned that there were officers here as there had been in France, who consented to seek certain outside profits. It was part of his job to meet these men privately and to compensate them according to the information they supplied.

On the whole, the Abednours were honest enough, and made no greater profit than the majority of the firms handling government contracts. And Pierre was on the road to fortune at last.

His employers were satisfied with his work, trusted him with trade secrets, and often dispatched him on missions of considerable importance.

He had come to Souk el Trad, a large concentration camp in the north, to investigate the situation. An informer there was loafing or cheating, and Abednour Brothers had lost several contracts because of him. Until that time, Pierre had moved about the peaceful zone, and it was pleasant to change surroundings.

The camp was not very far from the front lines, and the atmosphere was most martial. There were long, orderly rows of tents, inhabitated by a military population. The traders' shacks, serving food and drink, were crowded with lean limbed, tanned, boisterous young men, who spoke of lust, drink and blood without shame.

A queer emotion robbed Pierre of his intelligence, caused him to forget his

errand. This was the existence he knew, and he was aware, with a surge of self-pity, that his only genuinely happy years had been spent with the army. The slang had changed, there were words he did not remember; but the spirit was the same. And he ached with loneliness as these brawny fellows elbowed him aside in their efforts to greet one another.

"Thought your mug bashed in long since. Where've you been?"

"Hospital. I was at the Bibanes. Talk of a dirty sector!"

"Same old blowhard! Always toughest where you are, eh?"

"Let's have a drink! . . "

Pierre could not stand this cheerfulness and went out. Patrols marched through the streets between the tents, led by noncoms whose jaws were barred by the *képis'* chinstraps. There were places that smelled of horse sweat and manure, places that reeked of burned powder. Before the medical tents, he got a whiff of iodoform. Familiar sounds, familiar scents!

ELSEWHERE, a section of Tirailleurs, or of Legionnaires, would be taking automatic rifles apart. Pierre watched them with itching fingers, longing for the touch of the oiled pieces. The old automatics he had known were gone, and these new weapons appeared more compact, had a sturdy, stolid, efficient look about them. The sergeants' voices were as monotonous as they had been.

"Release trigger, take out magazine, pull trigger twice to ascertain gun is not loaded. To do this, grasp the lever on the right with the right hand . . . "

Farther along, a rangy lieutenant was teaching privates how to throw hand grenades. Pierre watched him a long time. He swayed unconsciously with each swing of the officer's body, oddly fascinated. He felt that even today he could better this conceited young fellow's best by five yards. And he was tempted for a foolish moment to shed his coat and offer to show him.

"Old age," he muttered bitterly.

But he knew that was not his trouble. He ached because he was not one of them, because he had no right to join them, was unworthy of wearing a uniform. He had been thrown out of the army. That had been unjust, of course, but had he not justified the action by his later deeds?

They were serving a government that had deprived him of his decorations, taken the badges from his chest, although unable to remove the deep scars from his body.

"Damn fools, all of them," he thought, "if they knew who they were fighting for!"

Again, he could not deceive himself. They fought for France, not the France of politicians, grafters, profiteers, cowardly traders, but an ideal France that might not exist in reality. But they had faith, and that was what counted. And these others, the Legionnaires? What were they fighting for? Not the meager pay they drew. Something else, that could not be expressed in words, but that Pierre understood well. He knew soldiers, and admired these.

"The Legion—" he muttered.

The Legion was made for such as he, he recalled. But he laughed. Service, more service, without reward; a private's pay, a private's pleasure. Coarse clothes, coarse work, coarse food, coarse wine, and coarser women was their lot.

Pierre was not a fool; with the Abednours he was on the road to wealth. At the end of the Riff campaign, he would have enough to live on for many years, with fine food, fine garments, the things he loved. A Legionnaire did not smoke cigarets at twenty francs a package. Let the fighting keep on six months, and he would have acquired wealth with comparative honesty.

"Abednour the Third," he said sarcastically. "No need to hide it from myself. I'm getting like them. To the trader belongs the world. Glory to him whose pockets are full! The trader com-

mands the general on horseback. Courage? You can buy the courage of these Legionnaires for from eight to a hundred francs a month, throwing in soup and wine. Virtue? With some it's ten francs, with others a million, that's the difference. Honor? That's laughable. Cheaper yet. Which reminds me that I have a couple of thousand francs to pay. Eh, private!"

A large, pink faced artilleryman stopped at the call. Pierre saw that he was quite young and sported the beginning of a magnificent black eye.

"Where'll I find the quartermaster's office, fellow?"

"Down that way—" the soldier gestured. "On the other side of those trucks. Can't miss the buildings. Say, don't argue with those truck guys. I did. If they spit prune pits at your neck, just walk off. They're from a civilian company, but they're tough. Lot of Ruskies, you know."

"Thanks for the tip. Have a drink—"

Pierre walked away rapidly, leaving the other uncertain as to whether he had spoken with a millionaire or a madman. As he passed the trucks, prune pits whizzed by. But he did not turn and they soon let him alone. He found the man he sought, questioned him, obtained the information needed.

When he emerged from the building, night had fallen, and the first trucks were rumbling away toward the north, taking supplies to the combat units. He found the telegraph office, persuaded the military telegrapher that it would be all right to send a civilian's wire.

"There'll be an answer. Better take down my name." Pierre opened his card of identity, and the soldier noted the information needed.

A hand fell on Pierre's shoulder. He turned and recognized Bourquin, the detective from Oran. And he saw that the other had looked at the card—knew his identity.

"Say, you're the guy who was mixed up with Yolande Mercadier, wasn't it? Now, I want to know—"

FOR a moment, Pierre stood motionless. This was the inevitable result of his acquired carelessness. Instead of brooding all afternoon, he might have ascertained who were the few civilians in camp, where Bourquin's presence could not but have aroused interest. Now it was too late, and unless he acted swiftly, he would find himself with handcuffs on his wrists, starting back toward Oran in a tedious and humiliating journey.

As Bourquin spoke, he calculated his chances. In the telegraph shack two men were at the keys, and had not even lifted their eyes from their work. The scribe was recording the message on a machine for his report. Outside, in the darkness, many men were moving, toward the camp or down to the amusement places grouped below. Once among that crowd, Pierre would be safe for awhile.

Bourquin, probably armed, stood between him and the door. But the detective, not accustomed to the chilly night air in the hills, wore a military trenchcoat, belted snugly at the waist, buttoned up to the neck. Before he could grasp the butt of his revolver, Pierre would be lost to sight.

The Oranese policeman, recalling his first experience with the man he faced, shielded his face with his arms as Pierre darted forward.

"A moment! A moment—"

When Pierre did not halt, he leaped forward and grappled with him, his chunky arms seeming as hard as iron. Bourquin was surprisingly strong, and the two swayed for a few seconds, before Pierre freed his left hand. The thumb sank into the soft flesh of Bourquin's neck.

"Oh—!"

"Cut that out," the scribe said, rising. "Take your fighting outside, you hear?"

Pierre was perfectly willing to comply, but Bourquin barred the way. Pierre's thumb had affected his speech; his words were thick, unintelligible. When he

lunged again, Pierre gripped his wrist, snapped him forward and threw him against the soldier. He leaped out of the door, tossing his hat away. Even in the night the shape of a felt hat would have been recognized.

"Wait, wait—!" Bourquin shouted after him, foolishly.

Pierre walked rapidly uphill toward the military camp, until he came to the barbed wire. He followed this fence, stumbling into the shallow ditch at times, but putting additional yards between him and pursuit. After five minutes he halted, listened.

There was no outcry, no disturbance. The soldiers on the road talked loudly, laughed. Pierre understood why; Bourquin knew he had him. It would be sheer madness for a lone man to strike out into the open country, east or west; that zone was often penetrated by raiders from the Riff filtering through the lines. The departing trucks for the south could be watched easily, and northward was the front. Pierre was as much a prisoner as he would have been in a cell, for by daylight, concealment would be impossible.

"I'm done for," he thought.

Prison, prison—he must avoid prison. A hundred sketchy plans shaped and faded in his mind. He could buy a uniform, bribe his way into an ambulance group, or find a native village in which he could hide for a day or more. Very vague chances, but the best offered him.

Reaching for his wallet, he found the pocket empty. He remembered that he had been about to offer the scribe a tip, and that his money had probably been left on the table with his card of identity. His vest pocket produced a few metal coins, a total of fifteen or twenty francs.

Once more he was without papers, without funds. The wisest thing to do was to go back and surrender peaceably to Bourquin.

"Halt—who goes there?" a sentry challenged him.

"Friend. I'm a civilian, and I've lost my way."

"Follow the wires back to the road."

"Can't I come in and go through the camp?"

"No. Beat it!" A bayonet stirred, glinted feebly. "Go or I'll call the guard."

Pierre limped back wearily to the road. His shoes were not meant for this loose soil, had filled with gravel and dirt. The crowd was thinning on the road, as the nine o'clock leave men raced to the shacks. Very soon the patrol service would start; he would be signaled and picked up.

"Look out! Look out!"

The soldiers leaped out of the way of a passing truck, cursed. Pierre imitated them once, twice, then coming to a decision, he caught the tailboard of the next one. The load was made up of wine barrels, and he was not very comfortable.

The camp flashed by, the lights dwindled.

CHAPTER V

GHOSTS FROM THE PAST

TWO hours later the truck halted. Pierre saw that he was in the central place of a native village, undoubtedly evacuated of its population and used as a supply depot. There were many men moving about, the drivers and their helpers, gangs of uniformed men of various units, Senegalese, Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan Tirailleurs, artillerymen, engineers, *chasseurs,* and the ever present Legionnaires.

He leaped off, almost into the arms of a sergeant.

"Who's that stuff for?"

The chauffeur had left his seat and replied, thinking the question addressed to him. The sergeant called out a number, and a group of laborors arrived, unloaded the barrels without haste. There were several lanterns about, electric torches glowed as the drivers and the

noncoms checked off their lists, exchanged signatures.

No one asked Pierre who he was, what he was doing. For who would come up here who could be elsewhere? Not far off the rattle of machine guns and automatics resounded, and often a rocket shed its raw, intense light in the sky. Pierre was at first startled at the lights, at the sounds, at the obvious carelessness of every one here, until he recalled that between the German artillery he had known and the Riff cannon there was a noticeable difference.

He wandered aimlessly, watching a crew of negro infantrymen handling boxes. They managed to break some of them, and fought over the coveted tins of condensed milk. They, at least, had not changed. Despite regulations to the contrary, the white sergeants often resorted to kicks and butts to obtain order.

"Doing anything, fellow?"

"No," Pierre answered.

"Want to make ten francs?"

The speaker was a chauffeur, wearing a leather coat and a peaked cap. From his accent, he was a Russian. The civilian companies employed many Russians, almost all former officers under the Czar. Pierre, who believed he had forgotten shame, felt a twinge of regret before this man, a gentleman and an officer, who had evidently accepted hard work.

"I do, yes—"

The chauffeur led Pierre to a truck, eased down two heavy, lumpy sacks. The Frenchman shouldered one of them and followed his new employer.

"What's in this? Lead?"

"Soap, magazines, newspapers, junk. I'm carrying the bag with the bottles. You know, booze like whisky and gin, that the traders don't carry, also cologne water and perfumes. You are new on the trucks?"

"Started tonight."

"Better get into this, it's a good graft. I have a section of Legion which I supply regularly. The traders kick, but we can get away with it here. I do business with a guy who pays for the whole lot on the chance of selling it before the section moves away. Otherwise, you get stuck, often."

"Who goes there?"

"Abd el Krim and Klem," the chauffeur called back.

"Oh, it's you, Ruski? Same place . . ."

They were challenged several times, and allowed to pass. The hammering of the automatics was very near. Out of the night something hurtled, whining within inches of Pierre's face. He drew back, startled, then knew the sound: a bullet, the first he had heard in seven years.

"No use ducking them," his companion said. "Wait until you've heard as many as I have! This way—and watch your step; there's a signboard here advising care, and the Senegalese, who can't read, always misunderstand it."

The Russian halted a few hundred yards farther on, before a row of tents and shacks backed against an embankment. Both dropped their sacks and, at the sound, a man appeared with a lantern. The dull light shone on his underwear, on the breeches flapping around his hairy, bare calves. His face was in the shadow.

"Come on in, Ruski!"

"I'll be back and pay you in five minutes," the Russian said. He followed the man with the lantern into one of the tents. A lighter, yellow spot appeared through the canvas.

Pierre waited, then strolled in the direction of the firing. The embankment sank into a narrow communication trench, shoulder high. Then this rut emerged into a wider trench running at right angle, in which a few bundled shapes stirred at his approach. But they did not speak when they saw he was not an officer on duty.

For a long time he walked under the stars, until he rounded a corner and came upon a certain activity. A half dozen Legionnaires were grouped behind a machine gun. Another man—Pierre discerned the dull glow of gold

stripes on his sleeve—knelt on the parapet. Again, no one paid much attention to Pierre.

"Hold it—he'll shoot again soon," the sergeant spoke.

PIERRE rested a shoulder against the damp earth, enjoying the moment. The night wind was cool across his face, and the smells, the sounds, the tense, silent men about him forced his memory back across the years.

A flash cracked the obscurity, and before the detonation could reach the trench the machine gun opened fire. The cone at the end of the slender barrel kept the darting flames from sight, but Pierre could see the red face of the sergeant carved out of the black at each flicker.

Silence, then a derisive howl from the opposite slope.

"Missed!" the sergeant grunted.

"Sniper?" Pierre asked.

"What would it be? The postman?" one of the Legionnaires replied with a laugh. "Sure. Comes around every night, around that same place. There's an open angle through which he can hit down the slope from us, and when a guy whistles a tune he's liable to get a slug through his buttocks. Two fellows got hit Tuesday night. We wasted a whole belt on him last night."

"Where do you aim?"

"At the flash, cutting back and forth," the gunner, a corporal, replied. "What else can you do at night."

"Try a single burst, low and to the right," Pierre said.

The sergeant turned, spoke down into the trench.

"Who's that talking? Who made *you* gun commander, fellow?"

"Let's hear what he has to say, Kruysanker."

"Imagine yourself in that guy's place," Pierre explained. "Easiest way to get clear is to fall. He has picked himself a rock, with a rest for his rifle prepared in the daylight. He shoots and leaps off. Think you want to jump with a rifle in your hand, and see where you'd land."

"Suppose he's left handed," Kruysanker argued, "or suppose he figured that out for himself? Those slobs are no saps, you know. He jumps once right, once left, see?"

"Even in that case, you increase your chances of guessing right by shooting always at the same spot. It's easy to reason it out, isn't it?"

"Try it," Kruysanker allowed.

They waited and when the flash slashed the darkness again, the machine gun ripped through six or seven shots as indicated.

"*Machi menna!*" the sniper called.

"Well, wise guy?" the sergeant said.

"That's only once," Pierre pointed out.

There were long intervals between the sniper's shots. Other marksmen were occupied elsewhere along the sector's front. But the Legionnaires recalled having seen a rock at the point indicated, during the day, and knew where to look for their particular friend. Time and again the machine gun spat, ceased firing, only to have the Moroccan's long drawn out, jeering yell reward the gunner.

Kruysanker addressed a sarcastic remark to Pierre each time this happened.

"Eh, know-it-all, how do you explain that? You know, we know, but we can't convert him to our way of seeing things."

At last, following a burst of shots, no distant shout broke the stillness. The Legionnaires waited several minutes before speculating aloud.

"He's cooked."

"He's kidding you," the sergeant insisted.

But an hour passed, tolled off at intervals of five minutes by one of the men. This was three times the normal space between shots. They relaxed, grinned.

"Got him, I guess," the corporal said.

He passed his canteen to the others. The man next to Pierre handed him the felt covered container, and he took a

long, warming swig of *gniole*. The tears that rose to his eyes were not caused by the strong alcohol. He felt, for the moment, that they had accepted him, knew him for one of their own kind. He broke open his last package of cigarets, distributed them.

"What are these? Kind of tasteless, aren't they? Say, you're a civilian, aren't you? But you served somewhere, eh?"

"Forty-five months of Front," Pierre answered, "seven in the hospital."

He stood on his toes, to glance at least once over the parapet, at the slopes covered with the grayish fleece of approaching dawn. The enemy— He must leave soon, to go somewhere, anywhere.

"So long, Legionnaires."

The sergeant slid down to bar his path.

"Wait a minute! Where did you come from? Who are you?"

"Oh, let him be, Kruysanker," the gunner said. "What do you care?"

"I'm from tonight's convoy," Pierre said.

"You don't belong here." Kruysanker ran his hand over Pierre's clothing, pulled out the silk handkerchief from the breast pocket with a gesture of triumph. "Funny truck driver, you are. Come across; you're a newspaper reporter, aren't you?"

"Something of the sort," Pierre agreed. He had to give an explanation and caught at the one suggested.

"There are orders against your coming to the lines unescorted by a staff officer, you know?"

"Let him be," the corporal repeated. "The devil, you're just sore because he proved right. If you turn him in, you'll only make a fool of yourself."

"Silence, Corporal!"

"All right, Sergeant." The gunner remained mute as ordered. Manifestly, under the friendly surface existing in the Legion, real discipline prevailed when called for.

"Show me your papers of identity," Kruysanker challenged.

"Lost them," Pierre confessed.

"You heard that? I'll bet he is a foreigner, and you fellows have been talking your heads off," Kruysanker added indignantly, although he was aware that only general gossip had been offered. "You follow me to see the lieutenant. Corporal, replace me here temporarily."

HE PUSHED Pierre ahead of him. The sergeant was an honest, sincere man, but he was human enough to work out his rancor if given the chance. He was in the same mood as a hunter who has seen another man drop the bird his dog flushed.

In fifteen minutes of brisk walking, the two left the trenches and entered an encampment. One of the shelters was partly dug out of the side of a hill, tent canvas forming a hood over the front. Light was breaking, and a few men in shirt sleeves were moving about with pails. Inside the largest *gourbi* a lantern was lighted. Kruysanker lifted the flap, spoke a few words.

"All right, I'll question him," said some one inside. "But really, Sergeant, you seek Chinese puzzles in the simplest things. Bring him in."

Pierre entered. There was a folding cot in the rear, with rumpled blankets. A big man in khaki sat behind a folding table, burdened with papers, notebooks and maps. There was also a novel, with a paper-knife left between the pages as a marker. Pierre noted the title: "Lands of Sun and of Sleep", by Ernest Psichari. On a corner were grouped a tall bottle of brandy, bound with thin wire, a tin cup and a tumbler of thick glass.

"In a moment," the officer said.

He was signing papers, doubtless the receipts for the supplies arrived for his men during the night. Pierre checked an impulse to warn him, for the poor man was filling in his name mechanically, without reading. Obviously, he attached no importance to his task, was

merely eager to finish it before starting the day's work.

Pierre liked the man at sight, and knew that within a few minutes his feeling would change. This pleasant chap, finding him without papers of identity, would turn him over to the camp police, who would take him back to the camp and Bourquin.

He could see only the massive, great head with its crop of curly blond hair, and a sweep of frowning brow. The hands were large, heavy, powerful, too powerful for the pen. On the left breast of his unbuttoned tunic were three rows of faded, multicolored ribbons.

"All right, Sergeant, tell me all about it," the lieutenant said at last, pushing the papers aside with a gesture of relief. He sat back, buttoning his tunic, then adjusted the cross-belt over his right shoulder, his big fingers fumbling. He glanced at Pierre once or twice, quickly.

Kruysanker moistened his lips with his tongue, narrated Pierre's unexplained arrival at the machine gun emplacement. In all honesty, he could not but admit that the stranger's advice had proved good, and he was obviously beginning to feel somewhat silly.

"You got that sniper at last?"

"I think so, Lieutenant."

"Proceed—" The officer looked at Pierre, and blinked one eye rapidly; then he returned to his dressing. He had some trouble drawing the knee-high lace boots over his big feet, and muttered under his breath. When the sergeant was through, he shrugged. "I suppose now that you've started it, I must send this gentleman to the camp. But as it is probably what he wishes to do, I don't see what you achieved. You understand, monsieur, that you must report to the staff officer in charge of the press, eh?"

"I do, Lieutenant."

The Legion officer seemed startled by Pierre's voice. He rose, came nearer. Pierre saw that he was very tall, half a head taller than himself. And while he sought for the name to fit this known face, those well remembered, steel-gray eyes, the lieutenant halted short. His face was suddenly ravaged by emotion; he checked a movement forward with an effort.

"Return to your post, Kruysanker." He waited barely until the sergeant had gone, addressed Pierre, "At your service, *mon Capitaine.*

"I WAS speaking of you only last night," Lieutenant Michelon went on a few minutes later. "You left your imprint on all those who served under your orders, Captain."

"Don't call me captain," said Pierre.

"Why not? Because of what happened? Oh, I heard about it—you were not present at the trial and they gave you—"

"Two years in prison," Pierre stated dully.

A prolonged silence followed. Daylight had come and the lieutenant leaned forward to blow out the flame in the lantern. They sat at the table with the bottle between them. Suddenly Michelon reached out and his wide paw covered Pierre's smaller, bonier hand.

"Still, you are my captain. They can't change that, ever. Not for me, not for any of us." Michelon indicated the novel nearby. "Perhaps that's what brought you so strongly to mind that I knew you at once. Or I felt your presence near. We could not have gone through the experiences we shared without there remaining some spiritual link. You remember when I joined your company?"

"July 1915, in Artois," Pierre said quickly. "And it's hard to see in you the lanky kid you were then."

"I had enlisted with honest ardor, had come to the Front as men used to start for a crusade. I was lost, could not reconcile what I had imagined with the facts. I was about to break when you spoke of Psichari."

"Potion for a sick man," Pierre declared.

"You know better. A few days later, you handed me a copy of his 'The Voyage of the Centurion' which you had obtained for me. With all that weight on your shoulders, you had found time to think of the eighteen year old corporal whose soul was suffering from growing pains. That's not forgotten."

Pierre shifted his glance.

"It was my interest to have behind me men convinced of their worth."

"Tell that to some one who did not know you, Captain." Michelon flushed but talked on resolutely. "I've grown harder since, and I am not a sweet little Christian any more. But I was eighteen —and I admired Psichari, who had known my doubts, my disgust, had won out over them and gone on to die a soldier's death in Belgium, for France. Even now, it's not all rot, you understand. But then, to this day, I can quote from the Bible that single passage. You know, after the Roman Centurion speaks: 'When Jesus heard it, he marveled and said to them that followed, Verily, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.' Christ Himself had 'marveled' at the simple soldier's faith, sprung from his long habit of discipline. And He who asked the rich man to leave his wealth behind, he admired the soldier. I was eighteen, remember."

"It was a small thing, Michelon. My own private life, which can't have been unknown to you, should have—"

"I looked upon you as purified by the enemy's fire, Captain," Michelon said earnestly. "And I was not the only one. You helped Bertain, the radical-socialist, to stand his lot patiently, by using his own creed. Each of us felt that you were a friend. Bertain has not forgotten, either. I have his latest book—"

"Fine reading for a pretorian like you!"

"Here's the passage—" Michelon opened another book, read aloud:

> "Out of the mud, the blood, the ignominy, out of the welter of war, there emerges one strong figure, a paladin of service: our captain. This strange being, half god and half devil, was worshiped by the men with simple, idolatrous fervor. I admit I was one with them. Captain de S.A., symbol of a government I scorned even more than I hated it, taught me, killer and profligate that he was, more of true human understanding, of the spirit of fraternity, than any philosopher's writings.

"That was you, Captain."

Michelon's admiration hurt Pierre like a blow. Yes, he had once believed in service, in honesty, in devotion to an ideal. He had worked hard to give France, in her hour of need, not only mechanical soldiers, but conscious soldiers.

"You annoy me," he said at last. "I may have been all that. What matters? I may as well inform you that I am a crook, a fugitive from justice. It is your duty to send me back to pay for my deeds."

"Back to be arrested?"

"Sheltering me, you risk your commission."

"Remember Galtier?" Michelon asked abruptly.

"Galtier, Joseph? A gutter rat?"

"You say that, yet when he broke under fire one night on patrol, you got him back safely, covered him up. He died in the Legion two years ago. Mid-Atlas column. I was there, and the last thing he said was, *'Présent, mon Capitaine!'* And he didn't mean any one else."

"Have you time to listen to me? Michelon, I can't let you help me—you'll see why—"

Michelon called an orderly.

"Ask Adjutant Frey to take over my duties until further notice. I am not to be disturbed for a while, unless there's an *alerte* up front or the captain sends for me. Dismissed." The lieutenant addressed Pierre, "Nothing doing around here mornings. Tell me anything I should know."

Pierre took a long drink, started to talk.

He did not pause, showed no hesitation, talked to Michelon as to a confessor. And even as he spoke, he seemed detached from his own words, to hear them echo from a long distance, while his mind groped back into the past.

MICHELON had come into his company straight from a training depot. A tall youngster, beardless, pale, with gawky gestures and a perturbed soul eddying in his eyes. He was a volunteer, brought up in a religious school. Following a brief period of instruction, this boy had found himself a corporal commanding veteran *poilus* grown coarse and hard, superb fighters in the line but carousers everywhere else.

The corporal had been puzzled. These were the men he had heard about, the heroes saving the country. They guzzled and scoffed at patriotism, cursed at their chiefs. Michelon had wallowed a while, until he had imitated them, accompanied older soldiers on a spree. The reaction had left him sicker morally than physically.

As was his duty as an officer, an officer in the real sense of the word, Pierre had watched him, guided him. Seeing that Michelon was a lad accustomed to believe books, he had prescribed Psichari as he would have prescribed tallow for blisters.

Bertain had been a different problem. The bearded young man, a socialist, ardent, impulsive, the incarnation of the born rebel, had appeared to go about in agony because his brain was too voluminous for his skull. Pierre had questioned him, listened to him, admitted the logic of his ideas, pointed out that one man could not stop an evil merely by sacrificing himself.

Galtier had belonged to another type. He was the illegitimate son of a poor woman, had been brought up on charity. The jokes of his comrades, his sullen defiance, had been hard to handle. Pierre had rescued him under fire, and kept his passing cowardice secret. As a result, Galtier had told the tale to the entire battalion. His devotion had been annoying after that. He would clip Pierre's citations from the papers and read them aloud to expectant groups:

> "Colonial Infantry, Pierre de S. A.: Officer of great valor, cited many times, has again demonstrated coolness and élan in the attacks of the 26th August. Took his unit forward with superb dash—

"Fifteen lines," Galtier would conclude, "more than any other captain in the division!"

Now, Galtier had found a soldier's death, Bertain was a famous author, Michelon was a lieutenant of Legion. And their idol was a fugitive.

"So you see, you can't help me," Pierre concluded.

"Why not? Nothing grave in all that, Captain."

"In two years' prison?"

Michelon laughed.

"It's all a question of degree. Remember that village in Champagne—1916, it was, I think. A new man came to the company, and the others found out that he was an ex-convict—that he served his regular army time in the penal camps and the African battalions. You said to us that a man who wore the horizon-blue *capote* and the steel helmet, who faced fire as we did, was our comrade, and that if he proved a good soldier, it was no one's business whether he had served one day or ten years."

"You're either a fool or a good liar," Pierre said, rising. "Is it time for me to go?"

"Where to? Prison?"

"What else—even if I wished to tie myself for five years to a job I don't fancy, don't think that detective will not look up all recent enlistments in the Legion."

"No need to enlist, Captain."

"Then what?"

"Follow your luck," Michelon said. "Whatever guided you to me—there are some hundred lieutenants in this sector

—provided for your complete salvation. Even were I less superstitious than I am, I could not avoid seeing it. Here's the story:

"A sergeant of Legion was put in charge of a post in the Tonkin. The records burned up in a fire at Lao-Kay. He was forgotten for years, five or six—and as he had everything free, and lived with a group of Tonkinese Tirailleurs, he just drifted on, let his pay accumulate. One fine day he reports at Legion headquarters in Hanoi, says his enlistment is finished, hands in his booklet and vanishes.

"Hanoi sent this military booklet to Sidi-bel-Abbes, where the man was no longer on record, having been put down as transferred to the Colonial infantry when he was not heard from. And that booklet is here, for your use. I was his last section chief in the Legion, and Sidi-bel-Abbes sent it to me to find out if I recalled anything of the chap."

"Could that be done?"

"You know the army. With a military booklet, no one will question you. I won't be asked for it by headquarters until this campaign is over. No one outside the company need know."

"Does the description fit me?" Pierre asked.

"Let's see—" Michelon searched a trunk, opened the document." Zajac, Ernest, Austrian—"

"Ernest Zajac?"

"Best I can do on short notice," Michelon replied jovially. "One meter sixty-nine centimeters—that's about three centimeters short, but then no one will take a tape measure to you up here. Eyes: dark. Mouth: ordinary. Forehead: ordinary. Nose: ordinary—altogether an ordinary fellow! Let's see—there's nothing extraordinary about your face, is there?"

"You tempt me," Pierre said slowly. "But a uniform?"

"My business to get you one. But we'll have to take the section's sergeants into our confidence, as they have access to the records; and the captain. I'll introduce you to my noncoms when they report. Make yourself at home while I attend to my inspiring functions. And don't worry—you're in the Legion."

"But your sergeants will talk."

"That's true—you can't understand. You don't know my bunch. You, who like men, watch mine. The kind a chief dreams about, the remote ideal he strives for, in the flesh, ready for use or abuse. Must be seen to be believed. So long."

CHAPTER VI

SERGEANT ZAJAC

MICHELON was back before ten, and his orderly served them sardines. Michelon spread the oily fish on huge slices cut from a round loaf of bread, using his fingers which he was careful to lick afterward. It was impossible to worry with him near, for he was large, strong and radiated an enormous enjoyment of life. Pierre discovered a taste in food he had not known for years.

"The report," the orderly called.

"All right. Enter."

Five Legionnaires came into the shelter, an adjutant and four sergeants. They lined up, saluted, waited with their heels together. The adjutant was perhaps thirty-five years old, tall, bony, with a shaven skull and closely cropped yellow mustache. He seemed to have opaque shutters to hide the thought in his greenish eyes.

Next in line was a man somewhat shorter, slighter, pink of face, with slender wrists and ankles. He was blond, blue eyed and smiling. The third was much older; a round, fleshy faced chap with a great, grayish mustache and the air of having few things to worry about. The fourth was thin, spare, with deeply set, studious eyes. His temples were indented, as if he usually wore glasses. The fifth was Kruysanker, who started at seeing his acquaintance still there.

"Proceed—Adjutant?" Michelon prompted.

One by one the noncoms spoke, tersely. Michelon made but few comments, his questions were sharp. Pierre saw that his pupil knew his profession well, for he never faltered, gave his decisions quickly, cleaved knotty problems with few words.

"In writing—captain's report this afternoon—needs no sanction—give him eight days."

Kruysanker was last, and when he ceased talking, they waited for a word of dismissal. Instead, Michelon rose to face them.

"Gentlemen, I wish to speak to you privately. Your military personalities are in no way engaged. I do not give orders, I do not make requests. I shall present a problem to you, inform you of my decision. You shall be free to act as you decide later. Understood?"

They all nodded.

"This gentleman you see here is my former captain. I call him friend. There are those among you who know my career rather well, who have followed affairs in France in the papers, and who will know what that means at once. For the others, I have this to state: He is my captain, my friend, in trouble and a fugitive from justice. Or, more correctly, the police."

"Understood, Lieutenant—"

"I have decided to take him into my section, under a false name. Naturally, he can not be placed in the records without your knowledge. My commission will go if this is found out. Understood?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"That's all. Oh, until such a time as he can outfit himself, he must have a uniform from one of you. His name is Ernest Zajac, and he arrives from the Tonkin."

"A suggestion, Lieutenant—" The oldest sergeant spoke, raising his hand like a boy at school. Upon a nod, he went on, "Some of the privates have been to the Tonkin. Sergeant Zajac—that's the rank?—had better be careful when he talks about that place."

"I've been to the Tonkin," Pierre said.

"Fine," the other admitted.

The adjutant stepped forward.

"We all know Zajac now, Lieutenant. But he does not know us. I am sure I express the desire of my comrades as well as mine in asking that confidence be returned with confidence. I have told you, and I feel that these gentlemen have told you also, Lieutenant, of my past. To assure him of our full understanding and sympathy, of the utter foolishness of any gratitude he may feel, would it not be well to tell him?"

Michelon threw a swift glance of pride toward Pierre, as if to ask, "What did I tell you? Are they men?" and bowed to his inferior. Pierre stood as if stunned, shaken by the superb courtesy of this offer.

"Thank you," Michelon accepted after a brief look at the others for consent. "I shall proceed with the single reserve as to name, as is proper. This is Adjutant Schick, six years of Legion. Formerly captain in the Prussian Guard regiment known as The Canaries. Wanted at home for too enthusiastic a participation in civil strife. Luck made him a wanderer, but God made him a man."

"Captain!" Pierre and Schick said at the same time, bowing.

"This is Sergeant Bukowski, three years of Legion. Formerly *sotnik* of Cossacks in the Savage Division, Crosses of St. George, Sword-Knot of Ste. Theresa. Imperial army, White army, waiter in Constantinople, Legionnaire."

"The honor is mine," Bukowski declared.

"Sergeant Leroy, nineteen years of Legion. Formerly a captain of French Cuirassiers. Gambled away regimental funds. Oldest noncom in the company, three times reduced to the ranks. Has the distinction of having won the Military Medal twice, to show that depriving him of it on moral grounds the first time had been an error."

Leroy grinned in acknowledgment.

"Sergeant Marz, formerly lawyer in

Budapest, reserve lieutenant in the Hungarian army. Prisoner of war in Siberia. At the Red uprising, joined the Bolshevicks. Commanded a division in the Ural. Obtained authorization to go home as a propagandist, told the truth as he saw it, and is now under sentence of death by Moscow. Three years of Legion."

Pierre did not know whether to greet Marz as lieutenant or general, feared to employ the term comrade and ended with a bow, in silence.

"Last, Sergeant Kruysanker, Flemish. Sergeant-major in the Belgian army, introduced fiction into his accounts. Fled to Holland, where the woman left him when broke, and came to us, six years ago."

"No grudge," Kruysanker said, beaming.

"You may leave," Michelon concluded.

AFTER the noncoms had gone, Pierre turned a bewildered stare on Michelon, who smiled in amusement.

"You mean they understand what you are about to do, and undertake to help you as casually as that?"

"Legionnaires," Michelon stated. "They know what misfortune is. They've all made mistakes. They have been broke, have had to live. Take Schick—a wonderful chap, save when he gets drunk and has the horrors. But you saw how he went about making you feel that they understood, how he spared you the humiliation of having your past told and theirs kept silent. Men!"

Bukowski returned with an armful of clothing.

"I'm about your size and build, Zajac," he said. He produced an envelop from his pocket. "Leroy's had a look at that booklet of yours, when the lieutenant questioned him. He sends you the ribbons for the medals you're supposed to wear." He addressed Michelon, "Lieutenant, we're taking Zajac into our mess. We'll carry him awhile if needed."

When he had left, Michelon made a grimace.

"Now for the hard part—the captain . . . Stay here. I'll send for you after I've told him all about it. He'd spot a new noncom at once. Better play an open game with him."

"Think he'll let you do this?"

"It's done," Michelon reminded.

Pierre shaved, sacrificed the mustache. He was worried about the length of his hair, which was too thick to be strictly military. When he dressed, he was somewhat surprised to discover that a man his own age, with the same width of shoulders, had a waist slimmer than his own. He had to fasten the belt two holes short of the worn spot.

After an anxious wait Michelon reappeared, wiping his face.

"He wants to speak to you alone."

"How does he take it?"

"Feverishly, most feverishly," Michelon groaned. "But he won't let me down after he knows you. Name's Kerdavan, Captain Kerdavan. Yes, a Breton. Say, don't get sore at anything he says. Good egg, after all."

Pierre was admitted into the captain's tent immediately. Kerdavan was a short man, dapper, lithe. His large head, the powerful jaws, formed a startling mask. Pierre, not knowing quite what to do, joined his heels, saluted.

"This is most irregular, you understand?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Michelon is a damn fool."

"I tried to prevent him, Captain. Even now I am willing to end the whole thing and take what's coming to me."

"Why didn't you prevent him before?"

"I tried," Pierre repeated, turning scarlet. "But a drowning man doesn't scorn a buoy with absolute sincerity, Captain."

"Arrrh!" Kerdavan growled. He paced the tent, halted before a table, scowled, flicked cigaret ashes from a tray with his fingers. "Heard of you before. Give me your word that you were guiltless in

that first mess—war stocks, eh?—six years ago."

"My word of honor, Captain?" Pierre smiled bitterly.

"Don't be damn fool too," Kerdavan snapped. "Man has good friend like Michelon can't be an ass! You—soldier! Soldier's honor intact, never questioned! Fighting man! Poisonous business, all rot! Soldier to soldier, were you guilty?"

"No, Captain."

"Thought not. Saw former battalion commander, your old regiment, one night. Chap called you crooked. Slapped his face! Good man, good friend. Remember now about it!"

Kerdavan seemed to forget Pierre and strolled with jerky gestures about the tent.

"Irregular, irregular—damn fool business! Legion takes you—Zajac!"

"Captain?"

"You—Legion takes you. You're Legionnaire. Know what that means? No. No idea. Outsider, that's all. This sort of thing—irregular. Must be made regular. We'll see later. Dismissed?"

"You mean I may remain with Michelon, Captain?" Pierre asked uncertainly.

"You—not deaf. Hear perfectly well. Yes. Michelon, damn fool; so are you." Kerdavan offered his hand to Pierre so casually that it could not be refused. "Legion—Legionnaire—yet not of the Legion. Guest—ah—guest of honor. Dismissed!"

CHAPTER VII

UNDER FIRE

WHISTLES shrilled.

The hourly halt was over, the sections of the two companies of Legion reformed on the road, resumed the march at Kerdavan's signal. This had been the third halt since the start: three halts, therefore three hours; the world was a turmoil of sunlight and dust, of trampling boots and hoarse songs.

Pierre felt that he had gone thus, placing one foot before the other, since the beginning of time. He had suffered morally and physically in the past, and had refused to believe that hardships could break his will. But there were moments now when he yielded to despair, when he cursed Michelon, the captain and all the rest with blackest ingratitude.

It would have been preferable to surrender to Bourquin rather than endure what he was enduring. The boots offered him by Bukowski had been new, the leather stiff, and Pierre wore no wrappings on his feet beyond the silk socks kept from his civilian garb. His soles were raw, his toes ached, his ankles were bruised; it was as if he were walking on broken glass. Although he had preserved his body muscular and supple, it had been fitted for a brief, explosive effort more than for this grinding test.

Nevertheless, pride remained: if others were holding out, he could. Before him and after him men had discovered and would again discover the falseness of this conceit.

Four hours ago, emerging from the captain's quarters, he had sought Michelon to relate the details of his interview with Kerdavan. But his narration had been cut short by the blaring of bugles. The lieutenant had left with a brief word of apology. "Officers' call—"

Returning a few minutes later, Michelon had started to toss his belongings into a tin trunk, talking rapidly.

"I'm putting your civilian clothes into this—cover them up. The orderly'll finish packing. The trunks will catch up with us later. Both companies of Legion here are ordered to move immediately. I must go to turn the trenches we held over to the relief detachment. Find Schick, and he'll take care of you."

Adjutant Schick, busy with a hundred details, suggested that Pierre find Bukowski. The Russian was occupied himself, but found time to lend the new man an automatic pistol, a holster and several clips of cartridges.

"Walk anywhere you like with the

section, no one will pay any attention to you. Aim low and to the right with that pistol, eh? You'll need a canteen, too. Look around down there—plenty of them loose."

Pressed by necessity, Pierre found a canteen. It was one of several hanging outside a plank shack occupied by sergeants of Tirailleurs, and bore on its horizon-blue felt an inscription in black letters "Sixth Senegalese." The Greek merchant who owned the refreshment stand washed it out and filled it for five francs. When Pierre was ready, the tents had been taken down and the companies were already on the move. As he ran to join them, Michelon waved his hand in encouragement.

Elsewhere in Morocco, Pierre had often seen detachments of troops moved by trucks, and when they reached the village to which he had come the night before, he hoped that the Legionnaires would ride to their destination. He was disappointed; the flat roofed houses were left behind and the column swung into the open country.

Until fatigue swept him, Pierre enjoyed the moment. But later, he gritted his teeth with pain. The nearest man was Sergeant Leroy. He was fifty, or very near that age—if he counted nineteen years of Legion and had been a cavalry captain before joining. Before the war there had been few men of that rank under thirty. Yet the veteran was admirable, walking with his *képi* tilted over one eye, tunic opened on his hairy chest, a cloth thrown loosely upon his seamed, sunburned neck. His face was placid, he sucked a pipe cheerfully.

Several men in the section were undoubtedly as old as Pierre—the middle thirties—yet carried on without complaint, exchanging jokes, joining in the singing. They carried full equipment. The pack was of course much lighter than it had been when Pierre had served in the Colonial infantry, but still was heavy enough. To this was added rifle, bayonet, cartridges, water bottle, cooking pots, camp material and trench tool.

"I'm as strong as they are," Pierre thought.

But he forgot that these men had lived an intense physical life for years, while he had gone from hotel to hotel by car or railroad. After the third halt, he doubted himself, and spoke to Leroy.

"How long have we been going?"

"Three hours."

"In kilometers?"

"Twelve to fifteen."

"How much farther do we have to go?"

"One never knows. Wouldn't think about it."

"How far have you gone in a single march?"

"With this company? Oh, seventy to seventy-five kilometers. That was two months ago, when we were going to attack at the Bibanes."

Pierre was certain that he could not keep on four times again as far as he had already walked. But Leroy was right, he should not think about it. He rolled a smooth pebble in his mouth.

One—two; one—two; one—two . . .

HE TRIED to sing with the rest of the men at the next chorus. But although he remembered the tune, the words were new. Where had he heard this song? Once before, played on a mouth organ in a German trench opposite his position. Seven—no, eight years ago!

It would have been better to surrender, but Michelon was not to blame; Michelon had meant to help him. It was not his fault that this unexpected order had arrived. It had appeared that his possessing the papers of Ernest Zajac was an omen, almost a miracle.

A miracle? Not quite, for even with all the scribes and all the documents in the army, individuals got lost. Pierre had heard of a sergeant forgotten for years in a Sudanese outpost through such a slip in records. He had read in the newspapers that a man condemned to death as a deserter, by default, had been killed in action with another regi-

ment. It would be odd if the authorities decided to investigate Zajac's case!

Kerdavan was a queer chap—yet would he, Pierre, have refused shelter to a man recommended by a lieutenant he liked? For instance, a friend of Sanderval? Sanderval had been killed in 1918, in the Argonne, shot down by a sniper. Perhaps by one of the two hundred Germans with the companies, perhaps by Schick, the Prussian. It was hard to understand what these Germans were doing here. They could not love France, the ancient enemy. They were Legionnaires, fighting for their integrity as warriors, led by officers like Michelon, who read Psichari!

"'*Jesus miratus est—*'" Pierre murmured.

Latin—an old anecdote told about the Legion came to mind: A major and a private discussing botany in Latin in the breastwork at Tuyen-Quan. That major's name had been Dominé, which always sounded like *désiré* to him—as he desired to rest now. He shook his head helplessly, striving to keep his mind from wandering.

The whistles again:

"Halt—fall out. Ten minutes' pause!"

The Legionnaires broke ranks, scattered. Some of them had sufficient energy to scramble for coveted places in the shade of the bushes, to laugh and wrestle. But Pierre sank on a rock, rested his chin on his clenched fists. His eyes closed against his wishes, and his whole being slid crazily into space, to spin madly on the glowing rim of a gigantic wheel. Muscles knotted painfully in his calves, sinews burned in his thighs like red hot wires. The broad belt had chaffed his flanks and his feet were so sore he could have wept.

"Come on, Zajac, come on!"

Zajac—he was Zajac, of course. Leroy was shaking him by the shoulder, shouting in his face. The halt was over—the fourth halt—and the sections were forming. Pierre saw them move, marching around him, around and around, outside his own wheel on a mad disk of their own. Then he realized that he had risen automatically and strode beside Leroy as before. But men's bodies and their faces were no longer connected. The feet churned the dust far below, and the heads danced in the sky, grinning, red, bobbing about like toy balloons at the end of strings, with streams of bitter sweat marking odd designs on the coating of dust.

Where was he? Who was he?

Sergeant Zajac of the Legion? Nonsense! He was Pierre, sergeant of Colonial infantry; this trail was the path to Fez, where the natives had massacred Frenchmen. The date? April, 1912! Morocco, Morocco—he knew these rocks, he knew this earth, he knew these bushes.

He sang.

> "To make a private of Marines,
> There must be in one's chest,
> The heart of a sailor
> And that of a soldier!"

The others were singing, too, but they had forgotten the tune, and the words. Pierre bellowed loudly, vainly to correct them . . .

Water trickled over his face, and a stronger liquid flooded his mouth. He opened his eyes. Faces made a wheel above him, and he recognized them: Michelon, Kerdavan, Schick, Leroy—Legionnaires.

He tried to rise and discovered that he could not move.

Dropped out on the march—dropped out on the march—!

They were all talking at once, but kept on moving.

"It's the new man, Zajac."

"Just come from the Tonkin."

"Sunstroke—sunstroke—sunstroke..."

No stragglers allowed on column in time of war. Pierre remembered that. No stragglers—they would probably shoot him. They would be right. Probably, it was just as well. He needed a long rest.

He smiled faintly, closed his eyes, slept.

PIERRE awoke in darkness. For a long while he could not recall where he was, what had happened. The past was blank for a stretch of years, and all he could think of was the stableyard of his father's house. The stableyard, and the creak of wheels, the thumping of horses' hoofs.

He was on a blanket spread over wooden cases. When he tried to sit up, his head struck canvas. The driver spoke again, and he knew that he was in a wagon, bumping over a rough road. He crawled forward, peered into the night.

"Hello—where are we?"

"Wish I knew myself, Sergeant. Your company is somewhere ahead."

"Still marching?"

"Still marching. You slept right through the grand halt at six. There's some food your comrades left for you, in the forward coffer."

Pierre located a mess tin, with fork and spoon fastened to the handle of the lid. There was a small, hard ball of bread and a bottle of red wine. The food was cold, greasy, but Pierre swallowed gobs of lentils and bits of pork thankfully. When he was through, he gave the driver what was left of the wine, slid to the ground. His feet were still sore, but after a few strides he found he could walk rapidly enough. He doubled up the road, inquiring from time to time:

"Kerdavan's company? Kerdavan's company?"

"Up ahead—"

At last some one answered his hail, and a tall shadow detached itself from a mass of men.

"Here—is that you, Zajac?" It was Adjutant Schick, who shook hands. "The lieutenant is somewhere ahead. Wants to speak to you."

Michelon had heard and appeared at Pierre's side.

"Come aside, Zajac."

"All right, Lieutenant."

The column was climbing a long slope, and walking was as easy off the trail as upon it. Michelon mechanically reached out to grasp Pierre's arm and help him up the slope.

"I was a fool not to think of it," he said.

"Of what?"

"You hadn't had any sleep the night before. It's a wonder you held on as long as you did. Thirty-eight hours without sleep and twenty kilometers under the sun, with new shoes on! Well, it made a good impression on Kerdavan. You fell unconscious, and even on the ground you moved your legs as if you were walking. When he found out you hadn't complained or asked to ride on the wagons, he almost cried. Your feet were leaking blood."

"I didn't know you allowed any one to ride on the wagons, in the Legion," Pierre answered, "otherwise—"

"Hell, we're human beings, after all. I don't say that on a flying column, in the South—but where it can be done, we give people a chance. The doctor looked at your feet and fixed them up at the halt."

"I don't remember that."

"He patched you up and I found you some other boots; wrapped your feet up, you know—" Michelon broke off, changed the subject. "Say, you went by the name of Pierre Salvadez, alias Pierre Mercadier, lately?"

"Yes."

"Because all company commanders got a circular about you. It wasn't hard to recognize you from the description, either. Kerdavan called me and handed it over, saying he left it up to me to do what I liked. They traced you as far as the village and know you're in the army zone, somewhere."

"They ask for my arrest, eh?"

"No; that's the strange part of it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered you. I have it here—too dark to read—but it just says that you're asked to present yourself at headquarters for questioning."

"I'm not ordered arrested at sight?"

"No. Here's what this says—" Michelon paused to recall exactly. " 'If found,

must be requested to report to the nearest bureau of the Intelligence department to supply information of value to the government.'"

"I wonder what about?"

"I bought a newspaper at the halt. There's an ordnance department captain who's shot himself, at Taza. Was under suspicion about some sealed bids for troop supplies. Perhaps he was mixed up with your people—the Abednours—eh?"

"Hard to tell. We—or they—had more than one informer at Taza. But in any case, it may be a trick." Pierre shrugged. "Even if it wasn't, I could not give evidence against those men. I was willing enough to work for them when I needed them. If you'll let me, I'll stick."

"Fine!"

"Where are we going—do you know, Michelon?"

"Nothing definite as to the exact place, Captain. But from what I gather, the Riff are going to try to break through to the Fez-Taza road at dawn, and we have to be there in case of emergency. Farther back, the place is lousy with artillery. There's nothing to worry about."

"What's my job with the company?"

"Stay with the supply train," Michelon said.

"I'd be safer up front," Pierre pointed out. "Attract less attention—and I wouldn't be sorry to see how it's done, anyway. Can't you give me a group?"

"Not yet." Michelon hesitated. "I'll tell you what: you stick with me—sergeant in charge of liaison group."

Therefore, when the two companies of Legion took their assigned position shortly before daybreak, Pierre remained near Michelon. The big lieutenant was in charge of two sections of Kerdavan's company, while the other two were led by Adjutant Frey, a taciturn, lean soldier who filled the rôle of sub-lieutenant. The captain himself, acting as detachment commander, was some distance to the rear.

THE Legionnaires, latest to reach the field and reputed as shock troops, drew the hardest task. They were to plug the outlet of a long, narrow ravine. The crests of the hills to right and left were occupied by Algerian Tirailleurs. It was obvious that at the moment of attack the enemy would make its strongest effort on level soil and pour through the ravine as through a bottle neck.

Pierre followed Michelon on an inspection of the soil. The lieutenant disposed his combat groups so that the fire of their automatic rifles would cross, interlock in a solid pattern. The group commanders brought their men forward to the emplacements indicated. Around each automatic clustered corporal, gunner and *pourvoyeur*, the flanks being covered by riflemen and the rifle grenadier.

The obscurity was rustling everywhere, and Pierre shared the anxiety of the rest. Throughout the night, detonations had slapped out irregularly. The outposts were in constant contact with the enemy, and as the light increased and the thin fog lifted like a tenuous breath from the waking ground, the firing became more and more frequent. Soon it was evident that the advance information had been correct and that the natives were about to make an attack in force.

A liaison runner from Captain Kerdavan arrived, murmured a few words to Michelon and was off to seek Adjutant Frey.

"Scouts returning report all going as expected," Michelon informed those near him. "They say the slobs are coming thick and fast out of the hills to the north and that the firing we hear is mostly from the isolated blockhouses shooting on the screens thrown before them to mask them during the mass onslaught. Somebody go to group commanders. Tell them use care; scouts are expected to return through our front."

Before Pierre could rise, one of the Legionnaires had acted. During the few seconds that he was gone, light came, and the runner could be discerned returning at the trot through the fleece of fog. He reported the message delivered and understood. There was an exchange of carbine shots ahead, and three minutes later the scouts identified themselves and passed through the Legion lines. There were seven of them, mounted native auxiliaries, commanded by a boyish French sergeant. Two of them were wounded.

Michelon rose to greet the noncom. Pierre saw them exchange a few words, grin. They shook hands and the lieutenant came back.

"They're close now. That kid says he was in contact with their advance guard and that there's nothing between them and us now. Runner; group commanders; enemy approaching; open fire at four hundred—on any one coming from the northeast."

Another Legionnaire sped away. He returned and reported the message delivered and understood. Michelon paced nervously. Behind the lines, Pierre heard the clicking of hoofs as the ammunitions' mules were driven closer. Another runner, sent by the captain, arrived, addressed Michelon.

"Everybody's in. Permission to open fire, Lieutenant."

"All right; understood." Michelon smiled.

The fog drifted before the land wind, filled the funnel of the ravine with milky haze, dispelled, vanished. Pierre peered ahead and saw a few khaki *képis* moving among the rocks and the bushes. The floor of the gully was slashed by the dry bed of a stream unrolling its band of glistening round pebbles against the red earth. Many birds flitted about, and rabbits sped across open spaces.

Pierre's mind flashed back to a thousand mornings such as this, in France. He had waited as he did now, many times, for the gray disciplined soldiers of the Empire. But the thrill was as strong, as new. The stakes he gambled each time were the highest known to man: life.

Michelon knelt, and those with him imitated him. He shaded his eyes with the curved palm of one hand, touching Pierre with the fingers of the other, lightly.

"See them?"

Three natives had materialized in the distance, dodging from cover to cover. One of them halted suddenly, lifted his carbine and fired two shots. Even though no answering fire came, he seemed satisfied that the way was barred and took shelter with his companions after signaling.

Michelon sighed impatiently. His whole face had set into a hard, tense mask in which his eyes blazed. He was paler than usual, and Pierre saw the same excitement sweep the others. As for himself, he felt detached, very calm. He had the somewhat mad impression that not being here legitimately, he would not run the same danger.

A single automatic coughed hastily. Those around Michelon could not see the target. But other weapons soon followed, with long bursts crackling from the Tirailleurs' machine guns on the slopes.

TO BE CONCLUDED

The Assassin

By F. ST. MARS

SHE moved quietly along, very hungry.

If a man came along and shook a portion of the hedge, hundreds of insects flew out of it and, after going a few yards, seemed to evaporate like steam from a locomotive on a dry day.

If, on the other hand, a man came along and, without approaching too close, merely looked at that part of the hedge and did not touch it, no insects flew out of it, nor could his most careful scrutiny reveal more than one or two, or hint at the hundreds there.

And that was the Assassin's case. She had seen a man do that very thing. Moreover, she knew that the insects were not like steam really, and must put themselves somewhere. But she was like the man who merely looked at, but did not shake, the hedge, who could see nothing, or very little, and that little already on wing, too far off for its own reasons.

She was in a world, however, where the law "get on or get out" is as immutable as it is with civilized man (not blessed with an "unearned income") today, rather more so in fact, and, moreover, a world which allowed no excuses—the insect world to be exact.

Slightly over an inch long, tawny, lanky, humpbacked, small headed, armed with her own good stiletto, and an unbounded belief in her own powers that made her scorn concealment, few could mistake her for anything else than what she was, queen of the robber flies. Of those few she had met none for some time—hence the hunger.

She settled upon a privet leaf full in the heated glare of the golden sun. The leaf was sweating, but not enough to give her refreshment. She remained as motionless as the leaf. Along her back her single pair of wings—showing that she was of the great order Dipteria—were shut parallel and flat. Her funny little head with its terrible, stiletto-like beak

regarded the world foxily and fixedly. Robber and worse were written all over her. I do not quite know why or in what manner, but it is Nature's way. She dresses most of her wild characters for their parts. Could any mistake a pig for the obese, vulgar one, or a lion for anything but King Leo the despot, or a fox for aught than the card sharper of the wilds, shall we say, or some men for—? But let it pass.

Thus, then, you have her. You picture her, her tawny self with the broad black sash about her slender middle, hungry, looking for a dupe, cleaning her stiletto with care—Asilida, the Assassin.

About three inches away, a little under three times her own length, that is, was another privet leaf, with a greyish blotch in the center, one of those marks you so often see on leaves when they have been injured, or for some other reason have withered there. The Assassin's strange eyes, which clustered in two sections, one each taking up a large portion of either side and the top of her funny little head, stared full at this withered patch, saw nothing, and passed on.

Just below her on another leaf was a bird dropping, and her eyes in their eternal restless stare fell upon that also, saw nothing, and passed on again. A little farther away a tiny portion of some dead leaf had evidently fallen and lodged flat at the base of a living green one; and this, too, the robber fly's eyes beheld and, beholding, ignored in their ever hungry search for something *alive*.

Her head moved round until her gaze searched the bark of the tree trunk near her; something had chipped it a little it seemed, so that the place, dark outer edge, lightish underskin, and lightest at the deepest point, could be seen plainly, but she was no feeder on wood to care about that. Nor did the little patch of wrinkled lichen close to the chipped mark excite her, seeing that she was no vegetarian (as a rule) and the lichen had nothing alive upon it.

The Assassin became desperate, because she, being all her life a curse to her insect neighbors, was herself under a lifelong curse lasting, we believe, even from the grub stage, a mighty hunger-thirst—no, other words will describe it—which never slept.

Blood, it seems, of any kind, may be a dangerous beverage, like to drive to some madness or other, if no worse than the thirst for more created by its own thirst producing properties.

We find this is the case of the weasel; the stoat too, is possessed of it, the wolverine, the polecat, and their allies—all are blood or brain drinkers, bearing a name for insatiable lust of slaughter. And if insects may be said to possess blood, we find the robber fly under the category of the weasel—driven always, hounded on remorselessly to slay, slay, slay far beyond the presumed needs of her size. Thus your weasel will "sip and go elsewhere." Your robber fly sips, too, and *must* go elsewhere also. In both cases there is no more pity for them under their curse than they themselves show. This surely is not a struggle for existence; there is waste here, not economy.

SINCE she had for the time, nothing to do, the Assassin occupied herself in cleaning. Washing is with most insects a religion. With flies—and she was a fly—it is a mania. She sat up and washed her face with her two front legs so absurdly like a cat that it was laughable; and her head, by the way, seemed able to turn almost round as on a pivot. Her beak, the terrible stiletto that made her so feared, was also carefully cleaned, her two strong wings with her hind feet, her balancers—the abortive hind pair of wings of other insects, reduced in flies to knobs or pendulum-like growths of some mysterious power without which they can not manage to fly—her short antennæ or feelers—all but the top of her back, or thorax where the bristles were, was cleaned, and each pair of legs carefully cleansed of the dirt taken off afterward. And it is wonderful, by the way, how

much dust will accumulate on an insect, even when a scrupulous cleaner. Moreover, an insect must keep itself clean, since it breathes through its body, through little hairs, and if these once become choked with dirt there—well, there is no more to the insect, that is all; it suffocates.

And then suddenly—as suddenness is only known in the insect world—everything sprang from dead nothing to moving strenuous life and the scene, which had been empty of creatures before, became filled with shifting forms.

It was the man that did it, the naturalist. He came poking and prying quietly as he could—which to the wild folk was most riotously—along the hedge, and he shattered the spell. His unheeding big foot lifted in its stride to fall in another second upon two pellets of sheep dung on the ground, and—they got up and ran away. They were, in fact, as you see, not what they pretended to be but little beetles, who mimicked what they did mimic for the good of their health. No enemy, hungry or otherwise, wanted that which, by drawing in their legs hedgehog fashion, they kidded all the world that they were, and they lived in consequence.

The naturalist did not notice the wonder, and who is to say whether the robber fly did?

But whatever may have been the case with the little black beetles, there could be no question about what followed. She saw it all as clearly as you or I.

In his next stride the boot of the man would have come down upon the inch or so of broken branch—if it had been there. It was not, however. In the last moment it had miraculously shot out wings and, developing into a beautiful gray moth with buff tip wings, had fled upward.

This the man saw, but he did not see the Assassin leave her privet leaf in silence, save for her soft, thick hum, swing out clear, and drop like a drawn brown wire upon the big, fat, downy moth.

Now moths have fine eyes—often like rubies set in plush—peculiar eyes, like the orbs of a feverish consumptive, and they know how to use them. Daylight may make a difference to some, not all, not to this one. She saw the drawn brown wire, at any rate, and straightway as a tumbler pigeon tumbles she fell. It was quick work, pretty work, if you or I could have seen it, but our eyes would have been left behind. And the Assassin whizzed past, all claws clutching and extended like grappling irons, wings singing like taut cables. She had missed, missed by a hair's breadth—a moth's hair's breadth. And those whom the Assassin had missed once might congratulate themselves, for it was rarely that she missed a first, and still more, a second time.

The lightning recovery of the robber fly, and her magnificent swoop round was as wonderful and unexpected as the buff tip's instant dive into the almost tropical jungle of the summer vegetation. Neither, however, was more startling than the evolving, in a breath, of a tiny brown dancing moth out of the chip on the bark, and a somber green moth in place of the bit of lichen, as the naturalist dodged against the tree to see how the buff tip fared.

The Assassin swept back and settled on the hedge mustard flowerettes, and in the same instant saw several things happen at once, or nearly so. She saw first the naturalist's body come towering along brushing the hedge; she saw next the bruise on the privet leaf drop off and become another small moth; she beheld the bird dropping miraculously take unto itself life and become another prancing member of the moth tribe, a clouded border moth to be exact; she watched the little bit of dead leaf leap instantly to a fluttering winged one—a moth again; she was aware of the piece of brown twig curling without warning, and dropping incontinently headlong into the tangled green depths in the form of a caterpillar, and—and, I say, her feet that should have touched only soft petals as she alighted, touched something soft, truly, but alive and frantic, which darted in dazzling, flashing magnificence from un-

der her very beak, and went, sailing away, as it were a beautiful yacht, in the form of a very lovely butterfly, a clouded yellow by name.

Insects are inscrutable things, and it were hard to tell what they feel. The robber fly ought to have shown surprise. She didn't. She gave chase with that instant readiness to do the thing least expected, peculiar to her kind.

What speed she knocked, heaven only knows; too much for us to note what immediately followed, anyway. It seemed as though some sort of tenuous elastic thread were let loose from the hedge mustard where the Assassin was (but was not next instant) to the butterfly some yards away (where Assassin was next instant). One beheld the butterfly take on all at once an even more erratic flight than the erratic flight of butterflies as a rule. Then one saw her leap as if she were jumping some invisible obstacle in midair, and in the same instant one was aware that she had lost her identity and become instead some incomprehensible composite being neither of this world or the next (one trusts).

You picture to yourself a thing flying as a blind thing might fly anywhere, everywhere and nowhere, a thing with three pairs of wings, one pair transparent, the others creamy, orange and black; a thing with two heads, one superimposed on the other, with two bodies, with—but enough. The nightmare could not go on forever, and it fell finally, or settled rather, and became simply the cloudy yellow butterfly, with the Assassin grappling on top. Her beak, that awful stabbing tube, was thrust into the thorax, the body, of that frail Psyche of the flowers sucking, sucking, sucking, and Psyche died, beautiful even in death, curled, fell over, like some great sailed graceful stranded yacht, sidewise, and was no more.

A moment later we find the Assassin back on a privet leaf cleaning herself with the same precise care as before, but not for long.

The passage of the naturalist had done more than disturb things and make them give away their own pretty—should we say pathetic, since they are beautiful?—subterfuges. It had driven many to seek hurried positions which they knew—heaven alone knows how they do know these things, those atoms of juice in jointed tubes—to be untenable for long. In a few moments, therefore, back they came again not all together, but one by one, to the shelter of their suitable surroundings.

And the Assassin saw them, small fry all, scarce worthy of the attention of her, the "Bride of Death," but still a meal.

She selected the green moth, she who had played the lichen, and who—if anything is in a name—was famous by her full title of Scarce Marveil du Jour.

Never, mark you, was it the Assassin's method to make a fuss and bother. That was left to her victims. She got as close as she could, cat-like, to the moth, and then rushed. At least, I suppose she rushed, for the next instant the Scarce Marveil du Jour also, in spite of her title and clever acting, became a composite oddity, and died—the slow death of bleeding, bleeding in the grip of the vampire. Her beautiful, plumed, mottled green wings lay all soiled upon the grass; her body a husk, and—oh horror!—next moment the clouded border moth went sailing by, sailing by in the full glare of the afternoon sun and the grip of the Assassin, a beautiful delicate "creation" in white and black, and neither pale border moth, nor robber fly, nor afternoon sun said anything at all. That awful silence was the terror of it. Never a sound, mind, from first to last, that is, from the short six minutes before when the naturalist man had come along unheeding in the tumult of his size and first set these tragedies afoot.

IT HAS been said that spiders are "abnormal and dislike rain from their infancy upwards." It is true, but the Assassin knew nothing about this. She only knew that she disliked spiders from their in-

fancy upward, and had, indeed, a terror of them, a terror which is imbued in the hearts of all the great order of flies—that includes the daddy-long-legs and the midge—and never leaves them. This is only mentioned because it explains why the clouded border moth was found next day on the ground in a ruined spider's web by the man who had watched it sailing along the evening before in the grip of the robber fly, and he could not make out the reason.

The reason came when the Assassin, making to land on a dock leaf, was fetched up suddenly in mid-air by that sickening, vibrating, jarring dead stop that in the insect world can only mean one thing—capture in a spider's web. And this thing, this ever brooding dread of all insects had happened.

Spiders have no souls, of course. For all I care they may have no heart, and I know they have no feeling of any kind save hate. They begin life by murdering their weaker brothers and sisters, they carry on by murdering their husband if they get the chance, and at the end they murder such of their children as inconvenience them. They are not even insects. Not even possessed of a decent form. They are a stomach and a head on eight legs. The devil he taught 'em to set snares, and they be devilish cunning beasts in consequence.

The Assassin had no delusions; she expected less mercy than she was accustomed to give, and that was precious little. Also, though Nemesis would be quick, though the end slow, for spiders are like cats in some ways. Wherefore she struggled like five furies, and the clouded border moth struggled with her with all the remaining strength she had left it. Between them the web vibrated rather prettily.

Came then a sort of streak, and the spider was standing within an inch of the Assassin. Of course it was a female, and so much the worse for the Assassin. If it had been a male there might have been some ghost of a hope; with a female, none, now, short of an "act of God," as the insurance policies say. Your female has the rôle, in spiderland, and her rôle is a cruel one.

Goodness knows where the spider had arrived from or how she had pounced so quickly. But she was cat-like also in her caution, and the big sinister fly—over an inch long—fairly dancing with rage, and that terrible dagger beak held up threateningly made her pause. To close with an insect like the robber fly would be unhealthful and the spider had the cunning of a demon.

She took a line and walked round carefully. She was going to wind the Assassin up, bind her helpless hand and foot. She as good as said so. And did the Assassin know? Did she not! She nearly went mad at the thought of it—and a strand broke.

The spider hurried to repair the weakness, and leaped back for her life, the stiletto beak whipping down within a millimeter of her. She turned to resume her winding—and leaped again, a long hooked claw clutching after her hind legs as she went. Verily this big robber fly was no ordinary capture, and very anxious to get people in her loving embrace.

Again the process of manipulating that diabolical winding sheet began. The Assassin was once more smitten with convulsions, a fresh lot.

Then the raindrop fell!

The spider stopped short as if in that instant electrocuted. The Assassin was still for a second. Both seemed appalled. The raindrop was a very big one, and it hit the web with a bang that set the whole contraption of giddy tightropes dancing like a gymnast's net.

There was a pause, while a huge black mass of piled cloud sailed slowly right overhead. A wind, sprung from somewhere, could be heard approaching in the stillness.

And the Assassin got one of the two legs, by which she was caught, free.

The spider saw this, or seemed to see it and, recovering, hastened to get at least one rope round the black sashed waist of his captured pirate. She started

to move, and in the same instant, with a roar, the wind was upon them.

Spider and Assassin alike could do no more than hold on, twisting and turning with the straining strands, viewing the lashing trees at all kinds of angles, while the blast hummed past their legs and the web as past telegraph wires.

The wind romped on, and a pause followed, and all the world seemed to be drawing a deep breath, as if about to make a great plunge; and in the silence of the pause you could distinctly hear the savage hiss of the approaching rain, as it were a mighty escape of steam.

Then the rain also was upon them.

The spider jumped to attention like a startled tiger, then fled incontinently, the great drops pounding about her. The Assassin only did not flee because for the moment she couldn't. The clouded border moth never seems to have had a ghost of a chance, or to have counted anyway. All the same the robber fly continued her slow struggle.

Then strange things happened.

She saw three raindrops—great tropical raindrops, such as summer thundershowers only know here—strike the line ahead of the spider in quick succession, saw the line give and snap, saw the spider stumble, fall, and hang twirling round and round by the loose end, saw her slowly, grimly climbing up on to another strand; beheld her knocked nearly silly by another drop, and then watched ripping, snapping, tearing, flapping, web and spider, and all blotted out in a blinding sheet of rain, semi-darkness, and stabbing, staggering flashes of lightning.

I DON'T think the Assassin ever knew what happened next or, if she did, had time to think upon it. As a matter of fact, she found herself down upon the wet grass, kicking in her stilted, long legged way, strenuously, desperately at the tattered remnants of the web which hung about her like a wet blanket, and in a deluge of rain which threatened to drown her out of hand every instant.

She had no love for heavy rain herself. Indeed, she feared it with good reason, and this may have made her struggle the harder, with a writhing worm, and a big brown kicking beetle on its back and helpless as a turtle in the same position, for company.

All the same, it was probably the wet on the grass that freed her so quickly, and enabled her to struggle up and bolt for it on terrified wing through the downpour, what time, though she did not know it, the spider was kicking her last kick adown the raging torrent in the ditch.

It was a strange world that she fled through, transformed in the snap of a finger—the stupendous finger of Nature—utterly. It made one think about—oh, about man's civilization and the ants! It made one wonder, and feel rather smaller than before.

Not far away the rooks were cawing and flying about from tree to tree, utterly bewildered; a starling bolted from some poor cover, lost its head, fluttered about and bolted back again; the house martins and swallows, beaten down, sat and clung exhausted on the roofs, fluttering the rain from their wings in tiny clouds; a thrush looking like a drowned rat, dashed by, blundered into a laburnum tree, to be joined by a bedraggled starling, and the two kept there for some seconds before they discovered the shelterless nature of the tree, and bolted blindly into the rain again; a hedgesparrow, driven from a leaking hedge, dived, driving its full fledged second brood young before it, settled, gasping, full in the deluge, and half hopped, half flew to cover.

The interminable hum of innumerable insects in the air ceased as the hum in a telephone when a line is engaged and is suddenly cut off, drowned in two senses by the rain. There was a flash of lightning which seemed to split the leaden heavens into two parts, and in the light of it appeared the momentary vision of a flimsy green moth flying miraculously, dodging in and out, literally, between the drops to shelter; in another flash, as in a

dream, three gnats showed, dancing the gay gnat dance unconcernedly under a dripping bough, and in the same second, one gnat, struck by a single raindrop, fell headlong as if smitten with a bullet of lead.

A green bottle fly, metallic green and swift, shot out of the confused haze, and went down as a shot bird drops, smitten by water. And all the time a skylark somewhere sang and sang and sang as if its little heart would break with the effort of shouting "Courage, *mon ami,*" through the thundering, crashing, seething, hissing inferno to every member of the wild world in distress.

Somehow, blindly, ushered by the same wonderful luck that had escorted the green moth, the Assassin held her way, fairly seeming to dodge—there is no other word for it—the pelting raindrops, and as she flew, it was noticeable that she flew straight for darkness. The darkest spot was her goal; it meant cover.

If we deny to insects the power of sight to see, say, across a lawn, this one, at any rate, knew where to fly, and that in terribly confusing circumstances.

The Assassin, however, was not, after the passage of the successful green moth and the unsuccessful green bottle, the only one running that appalling gantlet. There came another. Humming loud and savagely she came, flaunting—you could see it even in that dim light, and in the flashes of lightning it fairly shone out—the dreaded yellow and black flag of the pirate wasps. Instantly the color flashed to the red eyes of the Assassin, and the effect upon her was extraordinary.

You know how the stoat, at sight of the helpless rabbit, forgets all about caution and rushes in even in the light of open day, and at great risk of discovery, to the butchering? Very well, then, so it was with the robber fly. She swerved (surely she must have risked death by the thousandth of an inch every instant she remained there out in the open). She took aim. She vibrated. Then, like a red projectile, she shot herself forward, but not so quickly that you could not see her, not so impetuously that there was not rather the suggestion of cat-like stealth than what I would term "falcon dash."

Apparently the wasp, fully taken up with the danger of the rain, never realized, never saw the danger of the robber fly until the latter, with a soft "Hurr!" fell upon her.

Even so, without any warning to help her, the wasp acted wonderfully. No sooner touched, than she marvelously leaped in mid-air. She knew the danger, even she, the dreaded one, the danger of the lanky silent fly who fears no insect that flies the sunlit air.

The leap was almost enough to clear her—almost, not quite. The robber fly had just managed to hook on to her back—her back, of course, seeing she was no fool to overlook the deadly sting—with one foot.

And that gesture was the beginning of the end, for whosoever of the winged jointed ones once falls within the reach of that deadly loving embrace of the Assassin dies.

See now, anyhow, and judge. The wasp went mad. She fled a-down the storm riding the wind and rain like a daughter of Nimshi; she risked utter annihilation forty times a second, but slowly and surely; with that terrible confident deliberation comparable only to a bulldog or an octopus, the Assassin hung on, hooking one foot after another wherever she could get a hold, till at last she had the wasp locked fast in that terrible hug—truly it looked an embrace of passionate love—from which in this life, even for the fierce and fighting wasp, there was no escape.

The absurd little head went up, the beak held ready, pointing straight down at the wasp's shoulder. For a fraction the stiletto was poised. Then it fell, lightly as a last long kiss.

Bang! The father of all the raindrops hit them fair and square, dashing them to the maelstrom vortex of the water above the roadside grating below, and—death.

Frontier Munchausens

By JOHN CONSIDINE

WHEN, after its first flush of hectic youth, a boom mining camp succumbed to the yoke of law and order, and shootings, stabbings and stage robberies became infrequent, reporters on the local papers had to rely largely on their imaginations for the "news." Some of them, in fact, like Mark Twain, would sit at a desk and invent locals rather than stretch their legs looking for news on the street.

James Townsend, better known all over the Pacific Coast as "Lying Jim", was the most prolific and consistent liar of the lot. He was an octogenarian when he did his last work, some thirty years ago, running a weekly paper at Lundy, California.

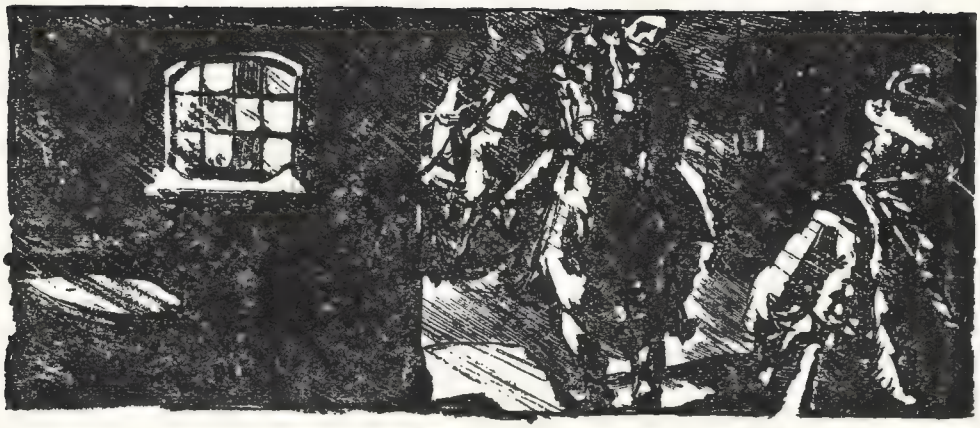
Lundy, once a thriving camp, had fallen on evil days, when a promoter named Sunderland sold shares in its defunct mines throughout the British Isles. In order to keep these investors in a contented frame of mind, he hired Townsend to get out the Homer *Mining Index*, and mailed copies of the paper regularly to the British stockholders.

There were but three men in the place, including Townsend himself, but he got out a paper that outdid any blood-and-thunder dime novel for gore and thrill. Murders, lynchings, elopements, embezzlements, train disasters in a place that was not even on a stage line, dramatic criticisms, and advertisements enough for a journal of 10,000 circulation regularly appeared. Glowing accounts of rich finds in the mines were a weekly feature, except when the monthly check from Sunderland, who led a sybaritic existence in San Francisco, failed to arrive on time. Then the reports would tell of pinching ore veins and lessening assay values. This resource never failed to bring a check by return mail.

William Wright, better known as "Dan de Quille", Mark Twain's mentor on the *Enterprise*, had a fertile imagination, as his solar armor story would indicate. It was about a man who had invented an armor with an air compressor attachment, worked by a handle projecting from the right side, in the neighborhood of the pistol pocket. With that devotion to science which is characteristic of inventors, said the story, he had put on the armor and started to cross Death Valley one August day when the thermometer stood at about 143°. He did not return. The next morning his friends became alarmed and set out to rescue him. Out a few miles they found his lifeless body. It was near noon, the heat was blistering, yet they reported on their return with the body that even then they found an icicle fifteen inches long hanging from his nose. He had frozen to death.

The evidence was plain that he had overworked his machine, producing a degree of temperature too low to be borne, and so plausibly was the story told that a few weeks later Dan found in his mail a copy of the London *Times* containing more than a column of type devoted to the invention, declaring it feasible and portraying graphically the advantages to follow could the right to make and use the armor be secured by the British government, for its soldiers in India.

Editor Charles C. Goodwin declares that, to his knowledge, the only time Dan ever blushed was when he read the *Times* article and realized the evident sincerity and earnestness of its writer. He blue penciled the border of the article, drew on the margin a sketch of a lad with his thumb to his nose and mailed it back to the author of the dissertation.



The PRINCE'S MESSENGER

By NATALIE B. SOKOLOFF

SEMKA was a typical gentleman of fortune of that time, the 16th Century, when the Czar, Ivan the Terrible reigned in Russia and the Tartar khans, once the supreme lords of the petty Russian princes, began their hurried retreat homeward into the distant Turkestan.

A typical gentleman of fortune, yes, but no gentleman in the present meaning of the word.

A giant of a man, bearded, coarse featured, he possessed a huge fist and enormous, bulging shoulders. There was a frown between the shaggy yellow eyebrows, and the great head was bent forward a bit with that stubborn expression we see in oxen. Like a large mop was his fair, tangled hair. The eyes were pale blue, timid looking, kindly.

Such was Big Semka, or simply Semka as he was called (no one, least of all himself, knew his real name), this free soldier-peasant, who stood one late December afternoon in the Red Square, bowing low in all directions to the cupolas, golden crosses, ikons and heavy portals of the hundred churches that sparkled, glowed and loomed mysteriously in the orange rays of the declining Winter sun, on all four sides of the famous square.

"Mother Moscow! Dear mother Moscow! Moscow, at last!" Semka whispered fervently as he bowed and crossed himself, now and then cursing furiously in an aside at the passersby who by their proximity interfered with his respectful greetings to the beloved city.

Half an hour or so ago he had bidden goodby to his *boyar*, in whose ranks he had fought against the Tartars, Lithvonians and the Swedes for the last five years.

In those days the Czar had no regular army of his own, but had to rely on the troops or, as they were called, *drooshins* of his *boyars*. These *drooshins* were made up of the *boyars'* serfs and such free men as Semka who had the advantage of choosing their masters.

On parting with his last *boyar*, Semka received nothing but a rough "get out!" in answer to his frantic expressions of his willingness to sign a fresh agreement. For being something of a spendthrift, Semka had drawn the whole of his five-

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year pay in the very first year, and now that that *boyar* was to exchange his martial profession for that of a courtier, Semka found himself, as he had found himself many times before, a lonely, homeless and penniless man. His sole possessions consisted of the clothes on his back, vague hopes in his stolid heart and still vaguer plans in his slow working, stolid head.

It was to be the old story all over again. He would wander about the city, procure himself a meal or just a piece of bread, either by begging or, more likely, by theft, find a place to sleep by means equally simple, and on the morning set out in search of some *boyar* who was in need of men.

There was a hint of approaching frost in the air and Semka shivered. He had nothing on but a tattered shirt, a small round hat, soiled, torn and threadbare trousers thrust into high boots with a great hole in the left toe.

"Ah, if I could get myself an *armiak*," he thought, and looked about him to see if there were any chance of appropriating, by more or less honest means, this warm, short coat of sheepskin from some passerby.

But as he looked he suddenly forgot all about the cold which made his lips and fingers blue and numbed his great muscles painfully. All at once he began to feel uneasy. It seemed to him as if he had come by mistake into some strange city, instead of into Moscow.

Moscow had changed. There was the Kremlin Wall, the vast cobbled square, the numerous stone churches, the low palaces of wood; everything was as it had been five years ago. But the change—he could just feel it . . .

"No! Is this Moscow? The gay, laughing Moscow?" he asked himself.

He remembered the great, holiday-like crowds that had always filled the historic square. The long lines of the merchants' stalls along the Kremlin Wall; the venders of candy, toys and multicolored ribbons, who walked about crying out their goods, which were displayed on large trays suspended from the shoulders, in loud gay voices. Yes, it had always been so noisy here—the fat merchants, red sashes wound about their protruding bel-

lies, shouting and arguing with the buyers; the children playing on the church steps; the men gathering about the wrestlers and boxers who held their bouts in the center of the square partitioned for that purpose; the women laughing loudly as they tried on the ribbons before the small metal mirrors held by the obliging venders of finery.

Now the square was silent, almost deserted. People did not loiter as had been their wont, but walked their different ways quickly; there was something mysteriously cautious in their glances and gait. Not a merchant was to be seen. The stalls stood empty. No shouting venders; no playing children; no laughing women in sight. Instead of the wrestlers and boxers, the small partitioned space in the center of the square presented to the hurriedly passing Muscovites the grim sight of two headless bodies and the executioner's ax half driven into the block on which the blood was darkening slowly.

Semka approached the spot quickly and looked at the bodies. His mouth opened wide and stayed thus for quite a while, in astonishment. The bodies wore the rich dress of *boyars*.

"Here! Listen here," he cried to a passerby. "What have they done, these *boyars?*"

But the man would not even look at him and walked on rapidly.

"Something's wrong," thought Semka, scratching his head. "*Boyars* beheaded in public! Never heard of such a thing!"

"Here, listen!" he caught another stranger by the sleeve. "Here, what's the matter with Moscow? *Boyars* beheaded in public! What have they done?"

"Treason," replied the man. "Convicted of high treason."

And with a furtive look about him he too hurried past.

SEMKA now decided not to let the next man go until he found out all about this mysterious transformation of Moscow from the city of happiness to that of gloom. By force, if necessary, he would make the next man explain it all—the furtive faces of the people, the absence of merchants, the strange stillness of the square, and this unheard of high treason of the *boyars*.

Suddenly all the bells of the hundred churches began to toll loudly and at once. Every one who happened to be about the square rushed madly toward gates, doorways and porticoes, as if to hide himself. Semka alone remained. But only for a second or so when he stood gaping about him at the suddenly empty square; then, judging it best not to meet the mysterious danger with his solitary person, he ran like a frightened hare and hid himself behind a post.

A man had already taken shelter there, a merchant apparently, judging by his fat face, protruding abdomen, and general look of prosperity; and the two crouched side by side, only stretching their necks a little to see, with truly Russian curiosity, the very thing which had frightened them out of their wits.

The bells were ringing loudly. The great gates in the opposite side of the Kremlin Wall, behind which stood the Czar's palace, were flung open and a strange procession slowly, noiselessly entered the deserted square, making across it toward the doors of the cathedral which stood wide open to receive the sinister visitors.

At the head of the procession walked in pairs a dozen or so monks, or men dressed in the long black robes and tall pointed black hats of monks, for there was nothing about their faces or figures to denote the monastic régime. They had the coarse, hardy features, the strong, giant-like build of fighting men of the time, who could wear armor that weighed a hundred and more pounds and ride horses of the gigantic type now used for transferring heavy loads.

They walked slowly, with heads bent, as if in humility, their strong thick fingers counting the beads of the long rosaries which hung about their heavyset necks. Now and then, however, their eyes would flash suspicious, venomous

glances at the unseen watchers.

Three or four feet behind these monks walked very slowly a tall, thin man, with a strangely flushed, hollow cheeked visage, and a small pointed, untidy beard. He was dressed like the monks, but wore no hat, and his thin, graying hair hung about his ghastly face. He moved on with difficulty, it seemed, now and then leaning for support on the arm or shoulder of one of the two monks who walked on either side of him. One of these was a large fat man with a red, fierce face. The other was tall, handsome, with a princely carriage.

All three apparently were personages of no small importance. Though of the procession, though dressed like the rest, there was that empty space of three or four feet in front of them and behind them which separated them significantly from the others. Behind the important trio came the rest of the monks, all walking in pairs, slowly, solemnly counting the beads of their long rosaries.

The procession was very long. The first pair of monks had already ascended the steps of the cathedral and were disappearing through the dark portals, while more and more of their sinister brethren continued to stream in slowly through the palace gates far away across the square.

The red rays of the sinking sun illuminated ominously the gold crosses and gold cupolas of the churches, touched rosily the blunt teeth of the Kremlin Wall, sparkled in the thin coating of ice which covered the cobbles, and caught and held in the executioner's shining ax, half driven into the block beside the two headless bodies, burst forth from it like some unknown and brilliant star.

The bareheaded monk passed so near the crouching Semka and merchant that the two saw distinctly that pale, ghastly face with its hollow, strangely flushed cheeks, and brilliant, suffering eyes. They could see even the drops of perspiration which stood out on the forehead and temples of this obviously ill, grief stricken man, who appeared sincerely humble in his bearing and uncertain gait and whose lips moved in prayer as his thin, long, death-like fingers counted the beads of his rosary.

"The Czar!" whispered Semka, hoarse with surprise, as he recognized the familiar features of the bareheaded monk.

The merchant's hand closed over his mouth.

"Keep quiet," he whispered.

Semka pushed him away lightly.

"The Czar!" he repeated hoarsely, but lowering his voice somewhat. "Can this be the Czar? Tell me, is it really he? The Czar? But five years ago he was a handsome man. He was a fine man."

"Yes, it's our Czar going to evening prayer." And the merchant crossed himself. "And when he comes back, do you know where he will go?" he went on. "You don't? Then you don't know anything about Moscow. The Czar will go straight to what they call *zastenok*, that is the torture chamber, in the palace, to torture the *boyars* and the noblemen whom he happens to suspect of high treason. Why called *zastenok?* Why, you don't know anything about Moscow! *Zastenok* means 'behind the wall'. See? Well, there's a long, narrow room just alongside the torture chamber, and in this room the Czar walks about, or sits, or—anyhow he can listen to what those under torture say without seeing their sufferings. See? To the Czar then the torture chamber is behind the wall, that is, it is *zastenok* . . . That large fat man with the red, fierce face on his right? That's the Czar's friend and counselor, Maluta-Scuratov, the chief executioner. The tall, handsome man on his left is his other friend and counselor, Prince Viassemski, the Head of Opreechina."

"Opreechina? What's that?"

"I see you know nothing about Moscow. Where have you been these last five years?"

"Fighting the Tartars, the Lithvonians, the Swedes."

"Yes, and the Czar here is fighting his subjects. All these monks you see are

not monks really. They are Opreechniki, members of the Opreechina. They are what they call the Czar's men. They spy on *boyars*, on the noblemen, even on us common people. They are looking for high treason. For these, their services, they are allowed to rob, loot, pillage and murder any one they choose, provided the unfortunates are outside their ranks. That's why you see those stalls there standing empty. We merchants have all moved out of Kremlin, into the residential parts of the city, away, out of sight of the Opreechniki. We do our business now behind barred doors . . . Yes, and the venders! I haven't seen one enter Moscow these last five years."

"But why do they dress like monks and go to prayer, these Opreechniki?" asked Semka.

"The Czar is troubled by his sins. He spends the long days and longer nights in that long apartment alongside *zastenok*, and he listens to the cries and the shrieks of the tortured and to what they confess. But there are some as say that he sees them, too. That he enjoys the sight. O my tongue, my wicked tongue! Curse it," and the merchant crossed himself. "Well, in between then," he continued, "now six, now seven, eight times a day, sometimes in the middle of the night, the Czar suddenly orders the bells to toll and sets out to prayer with his Opreechniki."

"Is he—mad?" Semka was going to say, but the merchant once more placed his hand over Semka's mouth.

"He is our Czar," he said quietly and crossed himself.

"Yes—he is our Czar," repeated Semka, taking off his hat and crossing himself fervently. "God help him."

But he felt an icy wave of fear creeping up his spine at the thought of his sovereign. Semka was not an exceptionally brave man. Nor was he a coward. Tartars, Lithvonians, Swedes; hunger, cold, cruel masters, none of these had ever made him afraid. He played with death every day, and laughed in its face. Yet he thought that he would have preferred to meet with Satan himself than confront this mad Czar who by slow torture procured confessions from probably perfectly innocent subjects, and then donned a monk's dress and prayed for his soul.

AS SOON as the last monk had disappeared through the doors of the cathedral which then closed slowly, the people began to emerge from their hiding places and hurriedly made off on their different ways.

There were a hundred questions Semka wanted to ask of the merchant, but the latter was already far away. Evidently it was not the custom of the Moscow populace to tarry long with strangers.

In view of the existing state of affairs —a part of which Semka had learned thanks to the merchant's easy tongue, and the rest of which he had surmised, for all his slow method of thinking, pretty accurately—to offer these questions to a chance passerby was out of the question. What if he should come upon one of those dreadful Opreechniki? He did not know how to distinguish them from other men. He had seen them in the dress of monks, but what they donned while about their unique duties he had had no time to learn. Very likely they had a uniform of their own and till he knew just by what signs of apparel to recognize an Opreechnik, it would be better to keep away from every one.

But the frost by now began to make itself felt in earnest. A thin, light snow began to fall. Dusk, but a few minutes ago all purple and red with the reflection of the already invisible sun, now enveloped the city with a bluish mist. Dim yellow lights sprang up here and there, in the narrow windows of the palace, in the dark small turrets and bastions that rose at regular intervals from the Kremlin Wall; while the stained windows of the hundred churches presented that kaleidoscope of color and pattern which would have made the Christians of the 20th Century liken the whole scene glimpsed through the veil of softly falling

snowflakes, to some beautiful Christmas card.

Shivering with cold, Semka betook himself toward one of the smaller gates. And through them, past two guards in bright red coats, tall pointed hats and with little shining hatchets, as signs of their calling, in their hands, he walked into the residential part of the city. It looked like a large, crowded village. Here were the dark narrow streets, the rows of low small houses, with here and there larger dwellings of wood with carved shutters and carved porticoes of the lesser noblemen and the richer merchants. But for the most part they were the whitewashed, thatched roof huts of the common people. Here too, among poverty and perpetual hunger, lights gleamed dimly through the downfall of snowflakes.

The best blood of the nation, the *boyars* and the noblemen of higher lineage, resided in another section of the city.

"Now I must get something to eat," decided Semka, whose empty stomach now began to remind him of itself by a series of sharp pains. "I will knock at one of these poor huts and ask for food."

He was on the very point of suiting action to these words, when sudden cries, shrieks, shouts, the beat of hoofs upon the cobbles and all the gay sounds of a scuffle, resounded loudly through the narrow street.

Whatever, whoever it was, it was very near to Semka. In fact, just around the corner. For the first time in his life, the stories of the merchant being still fresh in his memory, Semka conquered the natural impulse to run and find out what it was all about and if possible to take a hand in the argument. Instead, he made into the first gate that happened to stand open there, in the darkness of the empty yard, sat down on a heap of fagots, placed his elbows on his knees, put his chin in his hands, and in this philosophical pose waited patiently for the termination of the invisible battle. Shrieks for help, shouts of attack and the neighing of the mounts continued for another ten minutes. Then through a crack in the gates Semka caught a glimpse of a dozen or so riders flash past, and then once more all was very quiet and still.

Not being a really rash person, Semka sat on for some five minutes more, waiting. What if the assailants, or whoever they were, should return? But not a sound anywhere. Semka emerged into the street, now white and sparkling with snow, and turned the corner.

A shaft of light from a door flung wide open, showed him at once what had transpired here. The door had been broken down. It was, by all signs, some shop probably but a short while ago filled to the very ceiling with rich goods along the numerous shelves. Now, not a thing was to be seen of the unfortunate merchant's possessions. The place had been ransacked, looted. There remained but a heap of broken boards, and what had seemed candlelight from the distance, proved to be the beginning of the fire. The rear wall was in flames, which brilliantly illuminated the distorted body of the merchant across the threshold—and on the pavement outside three more bodies covered with blood.

Semka stooped quickly over the one nearest to him. It was that of a huge man dressed in a dark blue kaftan, a coat which snugly fitted the wearer's waist and shoulders and fell in rich folds about the knees. It was this kaftan, perfectly new and of the best cloth, that had attracted Semka. Being an expert in just such emergencies, it did not take him long to relieve the dead man of this beautiful kaftan and of the pair of boots of shining red leather, also perfectly new and splendidly cut.

His hand was already on the collar of the white shirt which he had thought of adding to the rest of his loot, when suddenly he perceived something glowing brightly in the shirt's folds over the dead man's chest. It was a small key, an amulet evidently, judging by the intricacy of its pattern, the perfection of its craftsmanship, and by the metal of which

it was made, which was solid gold. It hung about the murdered man's neck by a long string.

"I can sell it well," said Semka to himself. "No," he went on aloud, regarding the dead man with sudden pity. "I won't take your shirt, poor fellow. Whoever you might have been, you were surely used to rich dress and you'd never forgive me for leaving you naked to meet your Master and Judge. It isn't as if it were me, or some one like me, a common fellow. But kaftan now, you really have no need of. And this amulet, if only the saints will assist me to procure food free of pay, this amulet I will wear for luck and it will remind me to pray for your soul, for you certainly have saved me, a poor man, from freezing to death tonight."

Having by this short speech somewhat quieted his troubled conscience, Semka took from the dead man's neck the little key of gold and hung it about his own neck under his shirt, crossed himself, and made again into that gateway where he had taken shelter at the first sounds of the fight. Here he threw off his torn boots, pulled on the red pair, donned the blue kaftan and, pushing his round hat well back on his great head, which signified perfect contentment and a merry heart, he emerged once more into the street whistling gaily, one hand on his hip, his head erect, stepping out with that arrogant, lolling gait of his, which he always assumed at the happy moments of his life.

Indeed, his mood was such at the moment, that when he heard once more the beat of approaching hoofs, and a group of riders, apparently the same party that had looted the merchant's shop, appeared in the darkness, hesitated at the corner, then, on catching sight of Semka galloped toward him, he experienced no qualm whatever, but went on whistling gaily.

The horsemen, coming nearer and pulling up their mounts and bending forward in their saddles to peer at Semka through the falling snow, suddenly changed their expressions of ferocity to that of good humored friendliness.

"Ha!" cried one of the riders. "Where is your horse?"

"My horse," cried Semka nonchalantly. "Ah!" and he made a gesture which might have signified anything.

"Come with us," the rider went on, apparently satisfied with Semka's explanation. "We'll get another merchant. We've just cleaned one, you know. And then we'll go to some *boyarin* whom we have on our list. Let's make a night of it! Come!"

"No, I am tired. Sleep—" and Semka again made the vague gesture with his hand.

The horsemen laughed.

"Funny fellow, you are," one remarked.

"Where did you get that funny hat?" cried another.

"Well, good night, then," they shouted and galloped off.

Only now Semka understood how frightened he had been. He suddenly felt so weak that he had to stop for a moment and lean on the fence for support.

"Very strange," he ruminated. "They had evidently taken me for some one else. Hm—very funny horsemen . . . Now that I remember it, there was something funny about them. Hm. What was it they had attached to their saddles in front? Looked to me like a broom and a dog's head. A broom and a dog's head! A robber's band, perhaps? Opreechniki? But why carry a broom and a dog's head? But it might be them. Oh! Oh! The saints protect me. The good Lord preserve me!" He started to cross himself hurriedly.

HE FELT merry no longer. Indeed, the gloom which now settled upon him, chasing all the former merriness out of his heart, was so depressing that he pushed his hat back into its normal position and whistled no longer. And so busy was his mind with all kinds of suppositions and surmises about the identity

of the riders, that he did not think of the possible reappearance of these riders in the street.

Like one in a dream he found himself walking on in the snow, and suddenly came upon them, this time engaged in pressing three unfortunate pedestrians to the wall and demanding loudly that they hand over their coins. Two of the men at once produced the money, but the third suddenly shouted—one word only—

"Scuravias!"

The horsemen instantly pulled at the reins, backed their mounts and one of them shouted, greatly annoyed—

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"How could I, you dirty dog? You didn't give me time," answered the man angrily.

He was small of stature and dressed in an artisan's simple dark coat. As the riders made way for him he glared at them, then began to run down the street.

"Scuravias!" repeated Semka wonderingly. "Never heard the word. Not a name, surely. Scuravias! Ha!"

The street was empty once more, but Semka had become tired with the day's aimless wanderings.

"Here, brother," he cried to a man walking hurriedly along the other side of the street. "Here, brother, I want to talk to you."

But the man did not so much as turn his head.

"I tell you I want to talk to you!" shouted Semka, suddenly furious with hunger and fatigue. He wanted to inquire about the whereabouts of an inn. "I will pay them with this little key, this amulet," he thought.

"Stop, I tell you!" he shouted, and ran and seized the man by the sleeve.

The man at first made as if to struggle out of his grasp; then, his eyes taking in Semka's giant-like figure, he said calmly, one word—

"Scuravias!"

Semka let go. He was astounded. Again that word.

"Scuravias!" He scratched his head.

And the man showed no surprise at being released at once. Yes, he had seemed perfectly assured that this word Scuravias was perfectly comprehensible to Semka.

"Satan's work. Satan's work, surely. Witchcraft—or perhaps I'm sick. The saints protect me!" He crossed himself.

"Good man. Kind man." A thin, trembling voice sounded at his shoulder. "Brother! Give me your kaftan and your boots, brother."

Semka turned to see a tall, thin youth, clad in tattered rags, standing before him, leaning on a staff. He was bareheaded, and his long curly hair, the color of pure gold, glistened with snow. His eyes were enormous, blue. There was something very strange in their expression, which was kind, sad and meek. It was as if the youth was bewildered, lost, and those blue eyes of his were pleading to be reassured.

"Hm," said Semka, somewhat taken aback by the astonishing request of the youth. "And why should I give you my kaftan? I like that. Why don't you go and ask your master to give you decent clothes? Who is your master, anyway—haven't you got one?"

"Oh, yes I have." The strange youth smiled. "I have two masters."

"Two? Ho! Well, go to them, then."

"My masters are truth and justice," explained the youth serenely. "Poor they are, poor. Even as I am, their servant. Though rich we are in other things."

"An idiot; an idiot," whispered Semka aloud, trembling with superstitious fear. "Take it. Take it!" He mumbled through chattering teeth, as he hurriedly began to pull off the blue kaftan and the red boots, thrusting them into the youth's hands.

All the mentally unbalanced were held in great reverence in those days. Nothing was ever refused them. It was, indeed, considered a mark of distinction to be asked for something by an idiot. And so it was natural that on the whole Semka did not regret very much the loss of his rich clothes.

"But am I to go barefoot in this snow?" he asked pleadingly. "Have mercy on the poor man, idiot!"

"You can have my boots," replied the serene youth. "They are very bad, true, but you are not one to go against truth and justice, brother. And you can have my staff too. But give me your hat."

"My hat! Oh." Semka was ready to weep with self-pity, but obediently he handed his hat to the idiot, who now stood before him, strangely handsome in the blue kaftan and the red boots; with that serene face of his in its frame of golden curls and those enormous, blue, lost looking eyes.

The idiot put on Semka's hat.

"Goodby, brother," he said with his slow, hesitating smile. "I see you are not like them all. How is it you became one of them?" He regarded Semka wonderingly and in silence for awhile. "You have a good heart, brother," he said kindly. "And now that you have my staff, go and serve my masters—truth and justice. God bless you!"

He turned and walked away.

"One of them?" Semka wondered. "He too mistook me for some one else. That's what comes of robbing a dead man. Whenever I rob a dead man, always something unpleasant befalls me. Should I throw away the little gold key? What if it's bewitched?"

He opened his shirt, pulled out the key.

"No, I mustn't throw it away. I can sell it and get something to eat. It's an amulet. It can bring me no harm."

And indeed, for a time at least, it seemed as if the presence of that little gold key under Semka's shirt, warm now with the warmth of Semka's great chest, was to bring nothing but luck in the future. There was the inn at the end of the street, whose existence and nearness, somehow, he had failed to notice before. He hurried toward it. A great fire burned gaily in the large stove. The innkeeper proved a most hospitable soul for all his looks of a regular rascal. There were several guests about the long table, all common people, like Semka. They were dipping their large wooden spoons into the huge iron pot which stood in the middle of the table diffusing appetizing vapors of hot *shchee*—cabbage soup.

Semka sat down and began to eat. Never had the *shchee,* that national soup, tasted so wonderful, so hot so—so—Semka could find no word to describe it.

"That's what home means," he said to himself with conviction.

THE room was suddenly full of men, naked swords in hand. Semka clutched the wooden spoon desperately in his hand, but otherwise offered no resistance, as he was kicked roughly to his feet, had his hands bound behind his back and was pushed into the street with the other diners, similarly treated. He knew it was of no use to struggle. The only thing which made him angry was the innkeeper's wink. That rascal winked gaily at one of the armed men who turned to ask him something. And the innkeeper said, lowering his voice:

"All of them a poor lot, Master Opreechnik. You'll have no trouble with them. They are hungry, cold and worn out. They will confess. They will confess to anything. They will agree to anything you say, Master Opreechnik."

In the street the prisoners were pushed into a close group. The assailants mounted their horses, surrounded their victims on all sides, gave the order to walk quickly, and the procession started in the direction of the Kremlin wall.

The horsemen carried attached to the front of their saddles the strange marks of their calling. A broom and a dog's head. They were Opreechniki. The broom signified that they were sweeping the roads of the Czar's domains clean of high treason; and the dog's head meant that they, the Czar's men, could tear and bite the traitors, even as dogs can tear and bite.

They all wore the rich dress of the Opreechniki. The leader of the band could be distinguished from his inferiors

by the bright red hue of his kaftan. The others wore similar kaftans, but of dark blue cloth, the exact copies of the one Semka had taken off the murdered man.

As the Opreechniki with their prisoners passed through the gates and began to cross the Red Square, the heavy buildings on all sides of them loomed black in the darkness and through the still falling softly snow. Only in the distance, beyond the palace gates and just above the blunt teeth of the opposite Kremlin wall, there gleamed dimly the lighted windows in the right wing of the palace.

It was so still and quiet that one could hear the snowflakes settling softly over the hard, sparkling layers of snow which covered the cobbles. There was the shuffle of the prisoners' feet and the muffled, though loud, sound of the horses' hoofs as they passed into the snow before them.

"See those lights?" whispered one of the men walking next to Semka. "That's *zastenok*, the torture chamber. But no matter. We are small people. It is not us they are after. Moreover, we won't get into Maluta-Scuratov's hands, but only into those of his helpers. And anyway, we will confess."

"Confess to what?"

"To whatever they want us to confess."

"I suppose we will," said Semka absently.

The palace gates swung open before them and they entered.

II

WHAT was known as the torture chamber, or *zastenok*, was in reality a row of small rooms, seven or eight in number, each connected with the next one by a wide, circular arch. Every room had but one door, all opening on the landing. Beyond the wall opposite these doors lay the long narrow chamber where the Czar Ivan the Terrible was wont to betake himself and, unseen, hear every word uttered by the unfortunate men being tortured.

The architecture of this part of the palace was the same as the rest of the large low building. There was something magnificent, imposing, in the low beamed ceilings, the walls of solid oak beams, the low broad arches and small, narrow windows. The dark brown tones predominated, warm and glowing alike in the daytime, when the sunshine poured in like a gold shaft through the toy-like panes, and in the night when great torches burned in all the corners for illumination.

The predecessors of the first Russian Czar, the Moscow princes, had built these quarters to house their lackeys and guards, and the place still retained that atmosphere, homely and peaceful, left by their former occupants who had slept here, played dice and drunk their cider.

There was naught here of that horror belonging to other torture chambers, celebrated in history. No icy air of the underground prisons of the Medicis, with their underground streams, deep wells, mysterious precipices and the damp, cold stone walls. No iron rings, heavy chains, perpetual darkness, rats and stinking straw of the Spanish dungeons. No moats, horrible uncertainty, terrible silence, and the executioner's ax of Elizabethan England.

Nevertheless, the warmly glowing, well heated, brilliantly illuminated, oak beamed rooms of the Moscow *zastenok* excelled all these in horror. Perhaps because it was so unlike what one expects from such quarters.

And Semka, though something of a coward in little things, but a brave fellow as he had shown himself to be in serious situations, felt as he crossed the threshold of one of the torture cells a sudden tightening of his stolid heart.

The place was full of all kinds of strange machinery. Some of these Semka recognized, having heard them described. Over these he just allowed his glance to slide negligently. But there were so many left whose rôle and purpose he could not fathom, and these he

now began to study intently with his childlike blue eyes under the shaggy eyebrows which were drawn now more severely than ever into that stubborn frown of his. Never had he looked so much like an ox as at this moment; his giant figure with the huge shoulders, his great head bent forward a bit with all the heaviness and stubbornness of that animal.

"Never mind," he thought, regarding the mysterious machines askance. "I'll soon find out what they are for."

A man, naked to the waist and in a short leathern apron, untied Semka's hands and began his work.

Up to now Semka had had no thought but that of saving his own skin. Whatever it was they wanted him to confess he would confess to eagerly, he had thought. Anything to avoid pain and probable death. But all at once, as he lay there under the executioner's busy hands, he saw the whole matter in quite a different light.

He could hear the screams, moans, then the quick speech of the others, tortured beyond the arches. They were calling out, the unfortunates, the names of *boyars*, of the noblemen. Accusing this one and that of high treason. Crying, "Yes! Yes!" eagerly to the long, detailed questions. They were sending those—probably innocent—men to their deaths.

Something moved in Semka's heart. He began to breathe heavily. He recalled the innkeeper's humiliating words: "Hungry, cold, worn out, a poor lot! . . . You'll have no trouble with them; they will confess to anything . . . . " And his nostrils twitched with fury.

"Yes, it's my body that's worn out and weak with hunger and numb with cold," said Semka to himself. "But what about my soul, my will? Does not the church teach us that it is more precious than our flesh and our bones? Shall I let it perish like this, without a struggle? No, better I die, but it will remain clean of the world's dirt, and face its Master as unsoiled and as shining as when He encased it into this frame." He regarded his huge chest, arms and fists, not without pride.

"Here's the end to you, body. But never mind. We've had our fun and will die smiling!"

Whatever was done to one under torture, it was the aim of the executioner to keep his victim in full possession of the senses. Moreover, not a limb, muscle or joint must be broken.

And as Semka writhed with pain, clenched his teeth, gulped, opened his eyes, closed them, panted, hurled mentally a thousand curses on the executioner's bent head, prayed for death, the adventures that had befallen him since he entered Moscow wavered before his mind like so many distinct pictures.

The murdered man. . . . Opreechniki. . . . . The mad Czar in the monk's dress. . . . The idiot with his golden curls and enormous, haunted eyes.

The executioner meanwhile was working at him diligently. A small, darkly clad man, whom Semka had failed to notice before, bent over him as he read out loud the long list of questions from the scroll in his hands. Another little man, with long hair, a clerk evidently, was sitting at a small table, with the light of the burning torch over his bent, narrow shoulders. He held in his hand a long quill poised in readiness over the piece of parchment before him; but as Semka remained silent, the little clerk began to nibble impatiently at his quill. then to nod drowsily over his clean parchment.

"No, you dog!" thought Semka. "Not a word will you write down. Not one word, from me!"

He was suffering terribly and knew suddenly that he must shout or go mad. Shout something. Anything! Any word. Some word that would do no harm. A word no one would understand! And he yelled suddenly with all the power of his lungs—

"Scuravias!"

It had no meaning. It could do no harm. And like a shout of triumph, he

repeated it:

"Scuravias! Scuravias!"

The result of that shout was so unexpected that for a moment Semka thought that he was dead and that all that was transpiring around him was but a sweet dream preliminary to confronting the Angel Gabriel.

The executioner stepped back a bit with all expressions imaginable of astonishment and fear on his ugly face and figure. The little questioner cut short his sing-song reading on half a word and gulped audibly. Even the clerk who had gone to sleep over his parchment from sheer boredom suddenly opened his eyes, sprang to his feet like one stung, overturning his stool in the process, and stared at Semka.

Then the three of them rushed upon Semka. The questioner threw water in his face; the executioner hurriedly untied the bonds which had held the victim's hands and feet; the clerk felt his pulse. At last they put Semka on his feet and the executioner demanded—

Semka by now had collected his scattered wits.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"Ah!" he replied negligently, making that gesture with his hand which might signify anything.

"Look!" cried the clerk, suddenly pointing at the little gold key which in the commotion had fallen out and hung on the string about Semka's neck, for all to see.

"Look! The key! The messenger of Prince Viassemski!"

"Call Maluta-Scuratov!" cried the questioner. "He'll take him to the Czar."

"Yes. I go at once." And the executioner ran out of the room.

THERE was a soft rap on the wall.

The clerk, the questioner and Semka exchanged significant glances. It was the Czar in his long narrow chamber beyond the wall. The clerk went out quickly, almost colliding on the threshold with the large, fat man, in whom Semka recognized the fat monk on the Czar's right in the procession to evening prayer—Maluta-Scuratov, the Czar's friend and counselor and the state's chief executioner. The little clerk bowed low and hastily made off as Maluta scowled contemptuously.

Maluta-Scuratov had a large, red and fierce face, and black hair cut short; wore a thick black beard; and was in a perpetually disagreeable frame of mind. He prided himself on being an exceptional executioner in that he worked only on *boyars* and the noblemen, leaving the "small fry," as he called the rest, to his helpers.

Unlike his helpers, Maluta dispensed with the leather apron, bare chest and other marks of his profession. He was dressed in the simple clothes of a peasant —black boots, blue trousers and a high necked, colored shirt. Over his shoulders was thrown an *armiak,* that short coat of sheepskin which common people wore both Summer and Winter. His fat, red, fierce face was distorted now and then with ugly grimaces of perpetual displeasure. His black eyes looked tired.

He threw one swift glance at Semka and said—

"Are you the messenger of Prince Viassemski?"

"Yes," answered Semka boldly.

"Any success?" Maluta looked into his eyes meaningly.

"So, so," said Semka lazily and he looked askance and then very gravely at Maluta, giving him thus to understand that he did not wish to speak in the presence of witnesses.

"I understand," Maluta agreed. "You wish to speak to the Czar?"

"Certainly!" said Semka, who was growing bolder every second. He even assumed a haughty manner toward the chief executioner.

"If I had only told them the truth at once about how I came to know the word 'Scuravias', and to have the little gold key in my possession, I would have perhaps got out of it all, somehow. But now I'm lost, anyway. So why not have some

fun? Moreover, something may be gained yet by my deception," he thought.

For he had by now come to the exciting conclusion that he had fallen out of a clear sky, as it were, into the very midst of some political intrigue. A plot against some *boyarin,* probably. The word Scuravias was known only to the Opreechniki and those working up the intrigue, probably men trusted by the Czar, but otherwise unknown. The word apparently was the password for the initiated, then.

And what was the word, now that he knew it so well he could not be but right —what was the word but the combination of the two best known names in the land. Scuravias! Scura—the first five letters of Maluta's second surname, Scuratov. And vias—the first four letters of the name Viassemski.

Prince Viassemski, head of Opreechina and the Czar's counselor; Maluta-Scuratov, the Czar's right hand man.

And against whom could they be plotting but some good, honest *boyarin,* dangerous probably because of his democratic views, because of his popularity among the populace, and on account of that popularity not to be done away with in the easy manner of torture, execution, or even secret murder. Yes, it must be a very fine *boyarin,* indeed, who required by all signs complicated, secret organization whose aim was to weave the threads of their plot in such a way that the poor *boyarin* could be convicted of high treason with all appearances of perfect justice.

"And so, I am the prince's messenger," decided Semka. "Good! I will play your part to the best of my ability," he added, mentally addressing the rightful possessor of the little gold key. "That's what comes of not minding your own business, brother. Was there any need, really, to rob that merchant? And so the merchant killed you, and now I am the person of importance. Incomprehensible, indeed, are the workings of Providence!"

And terminating his inward arguments with this philosophic statement, he now turned to the matter at hand.

"I will speak to the Czar, the Czar alone, and no one else," he declared haughtily. "Such were the prince's orders."

"Very good," said Maluta. "I will take you."

"Grigory Lukyanovitch," said the little clerk entering the room. "The Czar wishes to see the prince's messenger. The Czar is in his bedroom."

"I will conduct the messenger," said Maluta, scowling again contemptuously at the little clerk as he scowled at all his equals.

"Come," he said to Semka.

They emerged on to the dark landing and, climbing a short circular stairway, found themselves in a tiny passage. There was but one door. The mad Czar, suspecting even his nearest relatives, his wife and sons, of the desire to kill him, had chosen this single room in the little turret for his private apartment.

There was no ingress to it aside from this, its only door, and to reach the latter one had to pass through the landing on which opened the torture chamber; and that was the only place of his domain Ivan the Terrible trusted implicitly.

Maluta rapped on the door and said loudly—

"It is I, Maluta-Scuratov, and the messenger of Prince Viassemski."

"What if Prince Viassemski should be in there? Or should appear suddenly later?" thought Semka. "What then? Well, let come what must come!" he decided with truly Russian recklessness, gay and bold; and even threw his head back and put his hand on his hip and, in this arrogant pose, was ushered into the presence of the Czar, Ivan the Terrible.

The chamber was small and low, surprisingly like a cell of some monastic recluse in its bareness and the simplicity of the few pieces of furniture. At the

oak table in the center of the room, in a high carved chair, sat the first Czar of Russia, his thin, deathly pale hands clutching nervously at the arms of the chair, his thin graying hair hanging in disorder about the hollow, strangely flushed cheeks, his small, brilliant eyes, full of the pain of mistrust and of fear, directed pleadingly toward the entering Semka and Maluta-Scuratov.

IVAN the Terrible was then in his early fifties. The sole and absolute ruler of the vast land was this pitiably frail, mentally distorted, suffering man, having by that time cleared the last and farthest province of the remaining Tartars, and conquered such Russian free towns and miniature kingdoms as Novgorod and Pscov, which had fought persistently against his supremacy.

He now had his ambassadors at all the courts of Europe, and had the satisfaction of seeing the numerous representatives of European kings bend their knees before him on state days in Moscow Kremlin. The western World for the first time in history began to look with flattering displeasure to this new country, Russia, which half a century ago was but a collection of separate small provinces and kingdoms, always fighting among themselves and paying heavy taxes to their lords, the Tartar khans. Kasan was conquered. And the mysterious Siberia, rich with mines, lumber and tillable soil.

But the Czar gave little thought to his success.

There were all these traitors surrounding him. His wife wanted to poison him. His sons might strangle him any day. Who could be trusted? In whom could he confide? How could he think of friendship? Sincere attachment? Affection? He, on the throne! Was there a man in the whole vast land who did not covet this throne? Had there ever lived a man who did not covet a throne?

Such meditations had utterly destroyed his mind, which had been distorted since infancy by the cruel treatment of his teachers and regents.

"Ah, Maluta, it is really you," said the Czar, smiling feebly at his favorite.

Maluta-Scuratov bowed to the floor. Semka followed suit. Then, straightening his giant figure, he threw back his head and looked with his blue calm eyes into the eyes of his Czar, brilliant with suspicion.

Ivan Vassilitch, as the Czar was called by his intimates and *boyars,* smiled at the sight of that simple face, that free bearing. At times he felt perfectly safe with the common people who, as he then would surmise, neither coveted his throne nor harbored plans of usurping his exalted state.

"The messenger of Prince Viassemski?"

Semka bowed to the floor.

"Leave us, Maluta," said the Czar.

Maluta-Scuratov went out.

"Sit down." The Czar spoke kindly. "Take that stool. How is it you happened to fall into Maluta's clutches? They tell me you were tortured—" he frowned and again suspicion darkened his hagged face. He thought that his presence in the narrow chamber adjoining *zastenok* was known but to the initiated, such as Maluta and the clerks, and would have been ashamed to learn that the whole of Russia knew of his grim pastime.

Semka understood, and to reassure Ivan Vassilitch, expressed all ignorance of the matter by a series of such comically stupid stares that the Czar smiled again feebly.

"I have been ordered," Semka said simply, "not to utter a word until in your presence, Czar. I fulfilled the orders. I forgot all about the password. And then—"

Ivan Vassilitch leaned his elbows on the table and began to question him.

"Tell me, then. How soon will it be? When can we begin to act?"

Semka thought quickly.

"Czar," he replied. "Prince Viassem-

ski advises caution. Prince Viassemski advises patience. We can strike but once. Let us strike at the right moment. So says Prince Viassemski."

The Czar's face expressed displeasure at first, but Semka's assured voice, his apparent sincerity restored Ivan Vassilitch's good humor. He leaned his head on his hand and seemed lost in thought for quite awhile.

Semka breathed freely once more. He had been correct then in his conjectures. The plot existed. But against whom?

"Yes," said the Czar at last. "Viassemski is right. We must be very, very cautious. And now about the details. What does the prince say to my plan?"

But Semka, unhappily, did not know about the plan. What answer could he invent to this? He began to perspire. He suddenly felt dizzy with terror and instinctively clutched at the table for support. The dizziness, however, and the gesture instantly inspired him with an idea how to gain time.

"Czar," he spoke weakly. "Not a morsel of food has passed my mouth the last two days. I have made the journey on foot—fifty miles on foot—there and back—"

"A journey?" said the Czar, frowning. "Why journey? Why go beyond Moscow?"

"The prince sent me to make inquiries about—about—" Semka began quickly.

The Czar interrupted him.

"You need not utter the name," he said, apparently very much pleased. "Your master, Prince Viassemski, loses no time, I see. He approves of my idea, then, to acquire all possible proofs against the traitor. That is very good. Very good."

"And I am weakened by torture. I want food," went on Semka, inwardly congratulating himself on the narrow escape. "Order your slave, your loyal subject, to be fed, Czar."

The Czar smiled.

"Why is it you common people never seem to have enough to eat? Really, it is beyond my understanding."

He clapped his hands and ordered the man who appeared at the door to bring food and cider.

"You will eat here. So that we may continue with our talk," he explained.

Semka, who had expected to be sent in to the kitchens, scratched his head thoughtfully when he heard this verdict. Nevertheless he threw himself hungrily upon the meats, game and pies which the servants laid before him. His appetite seemed to increase with the conviction that this indeed was his last meal.

"Eat. Eat well, poor Semka," he said to himself. "Eat. And then—Eh!" He shook his great, tousled head regretfully. "A bad world. Beastly world. But what a pity to leave it!"

HE ATE half of a duck, a quarter of the whole side of a calf, three enormous pies, tasted a chicken and emptied half a dozen or so jugs of cider in between.

Ivan Vassilitch watched him with unconcealed curiosity. In his surprise at Semka's powers to consume so much at one sitting, he postponed for awhile his questioning, the better to enjoy the spectacle.

Quick, heavy steps were heard outside, a trembling voice demanding something plaintively, then a rap on the door and Maluta's voice asking permission to enter.

"Come in," said the Czar, again clutching nervously at the arms of his high chair.

Maluta appeared, half pushing, half dragging over the threshold a youthful figure in Opreechnik's dress whom he held by the collar with one hand. He shook the now silent, but still struggling, figure into an upright position, let go of the collar, bowed to the Czar and said:

"I didn't know what to do with this lad, Czar. Some one let him in mistak-

ing him for an Opreechnik because of his dress. I came upon him just as he was creeping up to your door, and grabbed him. Look at his face, Czar! Have you ever seen an Opreechnik with such a face?"

The youth's hat had fallen off in the struggle with Maluta, and he stood there before the Czar bareheaded, his golden curls falling about his strangely beautiful, pale face, with that lost, pleading look in the enormous blue eyes, as he had stood before Semka a few hours previously in the snow and in the darkness.

He had on the red boots and the blue kaftan Semka had given him.

"Indeed, he is no Opreechnik," said the Czar, smiling. "But where could he have procured the dress?"

"The dress is mine," put in Semka quickly, "I gave it to him."

"That's against all rules of the Opreechina!" said the Czar, for the first time regarding Semka with suspicion. "How could you do it?"

"He asked for my clothes and I couldn't refuse him. You will know why in a moment, Czar."

Ivan Vassilitch thought for awhile.

"Who are you, lad?" He turned to the youth.

"I am the servant of my masters, truth and justice, O great and all merciful Czar," replied the lad serenely.

"An idiot!" remarked Ivan Vassilitch in an aside and he nodded his head at Semka approvingly.

"It is a pleasure to meet the servant of such illustrious masters," he said aloud, his bluish lips twitching with amusement. "Did they send you to me? Well, speak out. What is it you wish to tell me?"

The idiot hesitated.

"What I have to tell is not for such as he to hear," he cried out suddenly and pointed at Maluta.

"What? Don't you like him?" The Czar laughed, amused at his favorite's discomfort. "How do you like truth, Maluta? Ah? I bet it's the first time and the only time, perhaps, that you are tasting it! Well, leave us. Verily, the good God himself speaks through the mouths of such unfortunates," he went on, crossing himself and raising his eyes piously toward the ceiling. "Let us respect the desires of His speakers."

With a deep sigh Ivan Vassilitch leaned back in his high, carved chair.

"Speak, my poor lad."

As the door closed on Maluta the idiot's aspect and demeanor instantly underwent a change. Grave grew his strange visage, the enormous eyes lost the habitual bewildered look and, his head erect, he gazed intently into the Czar's eyes, fiercely, like a veritable judge. He seemed to have grown in stature. His voice, though he lowered it to a cautious whisper, rang out with the distinctness of a striking lash. But his speech, alas, proved on the whole absolutely incoherent. He talked at length, repeated himself, mentioned his two masters, laughed now and then softly.

He accused the Czar, pleaded with him, cursed the Opreechniki and Maluta, said something about the sufferings of the people—but it all remained very vague and the Czar continued to smile good humoredly as at so much nonsense, until the idiot happened to utter the name of *boyarin* Svoboda.

Ivan Vassilitch frowned, paled and sat up suddenly, clutching at the arms of his chair.

"What do you know about *boyarin* Svoboda, unhappy youth? he thundered.

"Ah, you harken now. You harken to me at last?" whispered the idiot fiercely, waving his arms and laughing gleefully. "Ah? Ivan, sinner that you are, you wake up now? Not bored any longer, are you? Yes. *Boyarin* Svoboda, the best of men, you are plotting against him. You want him to be tried for high treason. Him, your most loyal servant. Yes, you must have him out of your way. Ah! You are afraid of him because he is good and just and because he stands up for those you per-

secute, you cruel man, you coward! Let me speak! Let me speak to the end!" he went on hurriedly as the Czar rose to his feet unable to say a word from rage and fury.

"You are gathering evidence. Proofs! What evidence? What proofs? You unhappy sinner, you know there are none. *Boyarin* Svoboda a traitor? People would laugh at you. And so your Opreechniki are kidnapping, carrying off Svoboda's servants, his men, his serfs and make them confess under torture to having heard the *boyarin* speak of stealing your throne! You dare not murder him, bring him here to be tortured, as you have done with the other *boyars,* because you are afraid of the people's anger. Who would lift a hand against *boyarin* Svoboda, so beloved by the people? Who would dare to strangle him, poison, knife him? No one! Not even the dog Maluta! That dirty dog Maluta-Scuratov! And so you—"

"Stop!" cried the Czar. "Stop, I tell you. Or God is my witness, I will overlook your feebleness and have you killed. Maluta! Maluta! Men!" he shouted and clapped his hands.

Drops of cold sweat streamed down his ghastly face. He trembled in every limb. Panted. Wrung his hands.

Semka, half dead with fright at the Czar's fury, crouched on his stool, covering his face with his hands after the manner of the ostrich who thinks himself invisible if he himself does not see.

"Take the idiot out!" cried the Czar as Maluta and a dozen of his helpers and some guards burst into the room. "Flog him! Torture him! Make him suffer! Make him suffer as I have suffered while he blubbered his silly nonsense. Torture him, I tell you!" he yelled, seeing Maluta's hesitation.

"Torture an idiot!" exclaimed Maluta and even stepped back a bit while the others stared at the Czar with horror.

"Oh, leave me alone! Leave me alone, for God's sake!" cried the Czar all at once beginning to whimper like a spoiled child. "And throw him out. Feed him. Feed him well. Give him some coins. A coat of sable from my closet. And then throw him out. Get out now, every one of you. Get out! I must go to prayer. O the sinner that I am! O the terrible, unheard of sinner!"

He began to beat his chest with his fists while tears streamed down his hollow cheeks. He fell on his knees and began to pray feverishly.

The guards and executioners ran out of the room.

Maluta, pushing the idiot before him, motioned to Semka to follow him and the three of them, treading softly, went out of the room, closing the door behind them carefully on the praying Czar.

"Now it will be prayer all night through," Maluta confided to Semka with a shrug. "What a life! You'll have to wait with your business until morning, I guess. I'll remind the Czar about you. He is like that. Forgetful. Well, come on. Don't count it against me," he went on as they walked on side by side. "But I'll have to lock you up for the night. Any one who happens to be delayed at the palace for the night has to be locked up. Even trusted men like you, for instance. He is like that. Suspicious. What a life!"

III

SEMKA'S heart fell at this announcement, but his hopes of a possible escape revived somewhat when he saw that he was to be confined not in the palace, but somewhere outside the main building. He followed Maluta across the yard toward the row of small sheds, stables and kitchens which lay along the Kremlin Wall.

It had stopped snowing, but the frost had set in and the roofs of the palace, the roofs and cupolas of the churches in the Red Square which rose above the Kremlin Wall, the blunt teeth and the small turrets of that heavy structure, and the cobbles of the palace yard were covered with hard, sparkling snow, while

the midnight skies hung over this still Winter scene like a piece of black velvet.

Before the two had reached one of the sheds in which Semka was to be kept under lock and key, the numerous stained windows in the upper stories of the churches, which were visible from the yard, suddenly flashed with light and color. The thousand bells began to toll, resounding gaily over sleeping Moscow. There was heard the creak of heavy hinges as the gates, somewhere nearby, were flung open. Guards carrying lighted torches were gathering about the palace doors to escort the Czar and his Opreechniki across the Red Square to midnight mass.

"Hurry," said Maluta, opening the low, iron barred door of the shed. "I must change my clothes and follow the Czar. Guess you'll be comfortable here," he added, entering the shed after Semka.

There was a small, deep aperture high up in the opposite wall, which served instead of a window. Like the door, it was crossed and recrossed with iron bars. Something like a couch stood directly below it, covered with a heap of none too clean straw.

"Yes, you'll be comfortable here. Many a *boyarin*, a nobleman, has spent the night here," said Maluta with a malicious grin. "You ought to feel honored, friend."

He stood before Semka, the heavy bunch of keys rattling in his hands.

Semka thought of throwing himself upon Maluta, knocking him down, getting the keys, locking him up, and then taking to his heels, but almost instantly realized the unreasonableness of such an action. There were too many men in the yard. A sound from Maluta would bring them all to the spot. Moreover, the chief executioner, for all the handicaps of his fat, was evidently a very strong man. Semka scratched his head.

"Well, good night," said Maluta.

He went out and Semka heard the key turn in the lock of his little prison. There was nothing to be done but sleep. He stretched himself, yawned, made the sign of the cross over his mouth and once more scratched his head and, lying down on the straw, was soon snoring for all his worth. The gay, loud ringing of bells all around him, wove happy dreams about his tousled head, dreams of open fields, long roads, of the funny little faces of the Tartars peeping out from behind the high swaying grass of the steppes, while he, Semka, resplendent in shining armor and metal helmet, rode forth in the ranks of some great *boyarin* who was leading them against the yellow enemy.

Suddenly all this vanished. A bright light had wakened him up. Only the bells continued to ring loudly. He opened his eyes and instantly sat bolt upright, sliding his feet quickly to the floor.

Before him, holding a lighted lantern on the level with his shoulders, stood a tall, handsome man in the rich dress of the head of the Opreechina. Semka had never seen that apparel before; but he recognized in the man the tall monk of the princely carriage whom the merchant had pointed out as Prince Viassemski, the chief of the Opreechniki.

The bright red kaftan, embroidered richly in gold and green floss around the voluminous hem and the wide, bell-like sleeves, set off the prince's splendid build to perfection. A tall pointed hat of green cloth bordered with dark sable snugly fitted his handsome head, the fair glossy hair escaping in ringlets from under the fur.

Prince Viassemski looked what he was, a man of blue blood but of frail health which was greatly impaired by the excessive luxury with which he liked to surround himself and by the gay life he led, a perpetual round of pleasures often wild and abnormal. He bore no likeness to the other *boyars* who at the time displayed for the most part such coarse features, heavy bodies and huge stature, that it was difficult to distinguish them from the fat merchants

and the common populace.

The prince, on the contrary, had a long, effeminate face, very pale, with a skin so tender and transparent that the little blue veins could be discerned easily on his white temples. His nose was long with sensitive nostrils, that at times would tremble like those of a thoroughbred steed. He wore a short curly beard, and above the long red mouth a small fair mustache which lent a dandified aspect to his bearing and looks. The black soft eyes were directed at Semka, who continued to sit on his straw as if turned to stone.

There was no expression in those eyes; none whatever! And it was this lack of all feeling in the prince's look which made him more feared than even Maluta-Scuratov himself.

Viassemski placed the lantern on the stool beside the couch and crossed his arms on his chest. The bunch of keys in his hand rattled noisily.

"Well, fellow," he said very quietly. "Explain yourself."

"Hmm," said Semka, scratching his head.

"Come," went on the prince. "How did you happen to have the little gold key? Tell me the truth. If your simple looks do not belie you, you must be an honest man. You may count on my kindness. I have a bad reputation, I know," he added frowning, "but no one can say that I revel in the sufferings of others. As some persons do," he remarked with a grimace of contempt.

Semka understood that the person he meant was the Czar, and he averted his eyes discreetly.

"If you have done nothing wrong, why conceal it?" continued the prince kindly. "My messenger, whom you have been impersonating, was found killed nearby a looted shop. As soon as I learned of this, I hastened here. I was afraid that the Czar might have heard something about it, and expected to find him in an ugly mood. He is gone to prayer, so I did not see him. But Maluta told that my messenger had been with the Czar and was now locked up for the night. He gave me the keys and here I am. So far, it seems, you have done no harm. You may yet be of service to me. Come! Tell me all about it!"

Semka scratched his head and sighed.

It would be child's play to fell the prince with one blow of his great fist, gag him, bind him (there was the prince's silk sash), open the door, lock the prince in and make off. Outside it was very silent. The night was dark. The gates were open. He knew, as everybody did, the house of *boyarin* Svoboda. He would hasten there and tell him about the plot.

On the other hand, the prince appeared a kindly man. Perhaps he would, indeed, propose to take Semka into his service. Would perhaps trust him with some message, give him some task, send him somewhere. In which case something could be learned that would be of advantage to *boyarin* Svoboda.

"The escape. It can wait," decided Semka.

And in a few words he recounted to the prince all that had befallen him since his return to Moscow.

"SO YOU are seeking a new master?" said Viassemski. "I, on my part, am in need of a man I can trust. Good! From this hour on you are the messenger of Prince Viassemski. I will tell the details of the plan we are working out against *boyarin* Svoboda. I will explain your duties. First of all you will talk, of course, with the Czar in the morning. I have my special work to attend to."

"That's fine!" thought Semka, "I will know everything about the plot."

"But first," went on Viassemski, "you must take the oath that you will serve me loyally. That you will have no will, nor wish, nor thought, but mine. I am your master. Kiss the cross." And the prince, opening his kaftan, drew out a

small cross of silver which he wore on a silver chain about his neck.

"Yes, kiss the cross, and lose my soul, you dirty dog Opreechnik!" said Semka to himself, as he rose, approached Viassemski, and bent his head as if to kiss the cross.

Instead, he struck the prince a blow on the head with his fist. The prince fell. Not a sound escaped him. Semka snatched the sash which was wound about the prince's waist. He tore it into strips, gagged the unconscious man, tied his hands and feet, then lifting him in his arms threw him on the straw.

"Nice and soft," he remarked with a grin.

He unlocked the door, peeped out. There was no one in sight. He went out, locked the door and, stooping quickly, thrust the keys into the snow, and keeping in the shadow of the Kremlin Wall, made his way toward the gates. Here two guards stood. Semka watched them. They were walking to and fro before the open gates and now and then, on passing each other, both would stop and, standing close together, talk between themselves. Semka was waiting for the moment when the two of them would turn their backs to him simultaneously. Then he could pass by and out into the square unnoticed.

That moment came, and Semka in one stride was outside the palace and in the Red Square. Keeping close to the wall, he began to run, but on reaching the first street which, turning to the left, led into that part of Moscow where stood the beamed, imposing dwellings of the *boyars* and the better noblemen, he slowed down, turned into this street, and proceeded on at a brisk walk. He was making for the house of the *boyarin* Svoboda.

In the midst of the cruelty, perpetual wars, reigning injustice and endless flow of innocent blood, which characterized the first half of the 16th Century in Russia, the personality of *boyarin* Svoboda was like a shaft of serene light in the tumult of those dark days.

The common people looked up to him as to a saint. The Czar, Maluta, Viassemski, and such others who held it preferable to abolish what there remained of the parliamentary institutions, as for instance the Boyarskai Duma (a council of appointed *boyars*), and to transfer into the Czar's hands all powers of these ruling bodies; all these men regarded *boyarin* Svoboda as the most hardy and dangerous enemy.

Before the invention of Opreechina, *boyarin* Svoboda sat in the Boyarskai Duma and was the favorite counselor and friend of the Czar. With the appearance of Maluta-Scuratov and Viassemski, whose methods of the struggle for power he was not the man to imitate, he retired from court and political life of Moscow to live very quietly in his town house which stood on the outskirts of the city and just beyond the *boyars'* residential section; separated from the latter by the narrow river Moscow, some fields, pastures and a small wood. Just behind the house of *boyarin* Svoboda began the vast open country.

When Semka reached the gates of the *boyarin's* grounds, he did not fail to remark the silence and lack of movement in the *boyarin's* spacious yard. Not a serf, not a servant was to be seen. He recalled the idiot's words about the Opreechniki kidnapping the *boyarin's* men. He pushed the gate open. In the great house but a single light glowed dimly on the first story. The snow below that window sparkled, a brilliant white patch in the surrounding blue darkness. Semka ascended the steps under the carved portico and knocked at the door.

It was opened almost instantly by a tall, thin, stooped man, with a long gray beard, and wearing a long dark kaftan. He held a lighted candle in his bony hand.

This was *boyarin* Svoboda himself.

At the sight of Semka's face he smiled kindly and, without asking his

name or his purpose in coming to his door at such an hour, begged him to come in and warm himself.

But Semka only bowed respectfully, closed the door and looked about him suspiciously.

"Don't be afraid to speak, my good man," said Svoboda. "There's no one left to eavesdrop in my house. Of all my servants, I have but one left, a stableman. And he is too old and too deaf to hear you."

In a few words Semka told him what he knew about the plot, how the knowledge of it all came to him; described the Czar, Maluta, and so forth, and begged him to hurry and leave Moscow if possible at once.

"You look an honest man," said the *boyarin.* "I have no reason to suspect you of insincerity. Moreover, I have known all that you now tell me, weeks ago. But," he added sadly, "I did not know that the Czar himself is working against me. It is the end, then. . . "

"Go and hide yourself somewhere, *boyarin,*" said Semka. "Go to the monastery. It's but a mile distant. Perhaps the monks will take you in."

"That is impossible. The monks dislike me. No, it is of another place I've been thinking these last weeks. Only I had hoped—" he shook his head bitterly. "Yes, another place. What is known as the Wild Pasture. It's along the rivers Kuban and Don. There are no settlers there from the north as yet. A wild place it is indeed, they tell me. Many of my friends, *boyars* and noblemen, have fled there from the Czar's displeasure."

"Robbers go there, and bandits, and serfs, I know," said Semka. "But I did not know about the *boyars.* Go where you like, *boyarin.* Only hurry. Perhaps—" he hesitated and scratched his head.

"You have strength, health, a bold heart, my man," said Svoboda, guessing Semka's thoughts. "That stubborn frown, those shaggy eyebrows, the look of those clear eyes," he went on, smiling kindly, "that head bent forward a bit as if you were prepared to attack some one, some enemy—I like it all. You wish to come with me? Good! You've had your life forfeited anyway. Both of us, if we remain here, are dead men. Let's try our luck together."

IN A very short while, *boyarin* Svoboda, Semka (wearing an *armiak* at last, and a warm hat, supplied by the *boyarin*) and the *boyarin's* servant, an old man who was in the habit of going to sleep all of a sudden, even when on his feet, were in the saddle and riding at a smart trot along the country road. Semka rode beside Svoboda, the servant behind them, nodding over the bridle.

Before their eyes stretched the endless, perfectly level plain, covered with hardened snow, gray and desolate in the feeble light of approaching dawn. Not a tree, not a shrub in sight. Only in the distance the white outlines of the monastery against the greenish gray skies. Even the mounts seemed to sense the sadness of the scene, of the hour, and of the thoughts that clutched at the hearts of the three lonely riders. From a trot they changed to a walk, lazily moving their heavy hoofs.

Simultaneously, *boyarin* and Semka pulled at the reins and looked over their shoulders at the beloved city, some distance away now; a crowd of turrets, cupolas and low roofs on the other side of the river which was turning livid in the uncertain light.

"Goodby, Moscow," said Semka, removing his hat and crossing himself.

"Goodby, Moscow. Goodby forever," said Svoboda, and he too removed his tall hat and crossed himself piously.

Even the old servant woke up, took off his cap and made the sign of the cross over his yawning mouth.

They rode on.

"Some day, maybe, we'll return," offered Semka feebly.

"Never," said the *boyarin.*

And he hung his head and remained

silent for a space. Then, raising his head:

"But let us look forward into the future now. We are going into the Wild Pasture, into the camp of other unfortunates, like ourselves; the persecuted, the tyrannized, the enslaved. I had heard it said that they are starting to organize themselves into a likeness of a separate, independent state. Let us bring into this new future nation the three things, the lack of which we had most felt in Moscow. Let us bring into it freedom, justice and equality before the law! Let us beware, once among them, of those who strive for uncensored supremacy. Let us beware—yes, let us, I say aloud now, let us beware of absolute rulers!"

Semka scratched his head.

"But, *boyarin,* you forget one thing," he said at last. "Who will govern us?"

"We will govern ourselves," cried *boyarin* Svoboda, and his voice rang strong, his eyes sparkled.

At first Semka appeared somewhat distrustful of the idea, but having digested it for awhile, seemed very pleased with it. He pushed his hat far back on his head, put his hand on his hip, threw back his great shoulders and began to whistle gaily.

They had not noticed a solitary figure, far away and moving swiftly toward them. It neared.

"Who is it?" asked Svoboda, screwing up his old eyes.

"The idiot. You know, with gold hair and those strange eyes."

"Ah. The servant of truth and justice, poor lad."

They reined in their mounts.

"Hey!" cried Semka. "Where are my clothes?"

The idiot, clad once more in his tattered rags, stood in the snow, leaning on his staff and looking up at the three riders. His golden hair flew about his lost-like eyes, with the early morning breeze.

"And where did you get the staff?" went on Semka.

"Opreechniki took the clothes. They gave me the Czar's coat, but I wouldn't take it," replied the idiot. "And the staff? There are thousands of staffs lying about in Moscow. As many as anywhere in the world, I guess. One has but to choose one, that's all. And where is the one I gave you?"

"Ho! I have more serious business on my mind now than your silly staffs!" returned Semka haughtily. "I, that is we, we are going to build us a free country."

"Where have you been, my poor lad?" asked the *boyarin.*

"In the monastery. But they do not want to serve my masters."

The *boyarin* asked him if he would like to join them.

"You can sit behind my servant. Come with us."

"You won't need me," replied the idiot. "My work is with the oppressed. I go to Moscow."

They turned in their saddles and watched for awhile as, receding gradually, he trudged on in the snow in the direction of the river and the city beyond it.

"Forward! Forward!" cried the *boyarin,* turning his head away hastily.

They then touched their horses, bent forward a bit in their saddles, and were soon trotting briskly toward the distant horizon, where all was gold and rosy and shining with the rising sun—in the direction of the rivers Kuban and Don, miles and miles away, where a century later, there arose the new people known as Cossacks, famous for their independence, their courage and their gallantry.

A Story of South Africa

DROUGHT

By L. PATRICK GREENE

There were years that no one talked of; there were times of horrid doubt,
There was faith and hope and whacking and despair,
While the Sergeant gave the Cautions and he combed old Pharaoh out,
And England didn't seem to know nor care.
That is England's awful way o' doing business.
She would serve her God or Gordon just the same,
For she thinks her Empire still is the Strand and Holborn Hill,
And she didn't think of Sergeant Whatisname.
(Extract from "Pharaoh and the Sergeant" by Rudyard Kipling)

THE sergeant sat in the doorway of his hut and endeavored to concentrate on the book he held upon his knee. It was a weighty tome, dealing with the language, the manners and customs of the Ba-ila people. It dealt with them thoroughly, in a highly scientific way, with certain paragraphs of a physiological nature interspersed in the Latin tongue. These paragraphs irritated the sergeant. Not that he had any salacious desire to know the information that was so secreted from him, but because it placed another difficulty in his path to a thorough understanding of the leavening of men from a strange tribe who had been lately added to his command. The sergeant knew that before he could command men, he must first understand them: understand how they thought and the reasons for their actions, even in seemingly trivial things.

An ignorant man might make an enemy of them because he spat over his left shoulder instead of his right, or because

he didn't spit at all! Ignorance is no excuse, especially in Africa.

But despite his attempt at concentration, the sergeant's eyes continually lifted from his book and stared out over the veld, beyond the quarters of the Black Watch to the clouds which hovered over the hills on the horizon. Occasionally those clouds were lightened by flashes of lightning. Occasionally the air vibrated to the rumble of distant thunder.

"Blimme!" the sergeant muttered. "If the storm'd only break I'd know where I was. I could do something. As it is I can do nothing. An' the storm ain't going to break—yet. Them clouds an' that lightning—that's only a threat of what's to come."

The long dry season still had Africa in its grip. It had been so long since it rained that men had almost forgotten that it could rain. The ground cracked; the air was parched; the sap was burned from out of the bush; twigs snapped like grass stalks. What grass was left rustled lifelessly underfoot.

Not a day had passed that alarms had not been sounded from some nearby homestead on the Commonage, and the men had been turned out to fight bush fires. The careless discarding of a lighted match or a cigaret butt created an immediate fire hazard.

Dust was everywhere. Over the parade ground in front of the sergeant's hut where the ground had been broken up and pulverized by parades and drills, a dust cloud continually hovered. Its redness filmed the pages of the book on his knee. It frayed his temper; frayed the tempers of all men, white and black, converting them into tinders ready to flare up at the slightest provocation.

And yet, though the sergeant's eyes were on the distant clouds; though he expressed a desire for the breaking of the storm which would be an end to this long season of drought, the coming of the storm that he desired was not a rain storm, but one which would release, and bring out into the open, the pent up emotions of his men.

He frowned at the sound of high pitched, anger filled voices which came to him from beyond the orderly row of huts which housed the men of the Black Watch. He half rose from his chair, with the intention of going to investigate. But, with a muttered "What's the use?" he dropped back into his chair and forced himself to resume his study of the book.

Because he was, very definitely, master of himself, for a time he lost all consciousness of his surroundings.

He was interrupted presently by the arrival of Kawiti, his native corporal.

"*Inkosi*—" the black said; there was a sullen look on his face.

The sergeant nodded. Answering that permission to speak, Kawiti continued somewhat hesitatingly:

"There has been more trouble—another fight. This time between Guffa and a Bashilangi* dog named Nankuwa†."

"There are no dogs in the service of the Black Watch," the sergeant said sternly. "Only men."

"At least this Bashilangi howls like a dog," Kawiti said, grinning at his pun. "And he and Guffa were fighting. Not with their fists, as you have taught us to settle any grievances that may arise between us, but with knobkerries. With the aid of Private Bombva and two or three others I stopped the fight. Not without some harm to myself and those who helped me, though that is nothing. Not without having names thrown at us by those who desired to see the fight go on to its proper end."

"What was the cause of the trouble?" the sergeant asked sharply.

"What need for cause?" Kawiti replied, somewhat sourly. "Guffa is a Matabele; Nankuwa a dog of a Bashilangi. *Inkosi*," he continued quickly, before the sergeant could again reprove him, "how long must we put up with this? In days gone by, before the white men came to this land, we held the Ba-ila no more than dogs to

*Bashilangi: A clan of the Ba-ila. Their totem is a leopard. They refer to themselves as "the *kapiri*—the people."

†Nankuwa: The Howler.

be trodden underfoot. Whenever we met them in battle—no matter how greatly they outnumbered us—we counted them no more than flies which we removed from our path with a sweep of our hands. And now, because they have been white men's dogs longer than we, who are the Matabele, they pretend to have virtues which we have not."

"I have heard," the sergeant interposed dryly, "of a fight at Thaba-en-basila*."

"It has come to the point, *inkosi*," Kawiti went on rapidly, ignoring the sergeant's interruption, "when you must choose, I think, between us and these Bashilangi."

The sergeant shook his head.

"There is no choice, Kawiti," he said quietly. "In the Black Watch there are no tribes, no clans : only men. The uniform which you wear must destroy all tribal marks."

"The uniform," Kawiti grumbled, "can never make a Ba-ila dog a Matabele."

"It is not asked to," the sergeant retorted sharply. "It makes them men. Now go your way. I will deal with the men who fought in the morning when I hold court."

The corporal saluted, moved away a few paces, hesitated, then said:

"*Inkosi?*" Again a nod gave him permission to proceed. "In the matter," Kawiti said, "of giving out the rations for the evening meal—what is your order? Who shall be first served? The Ba-ila or the Matabele?"

"Must I tell you again," the sergeant began irritably, then he stopped. "For the present," he said, "until wisdom comes to you, there shall be two men appointed to distribute the rations: a Ba-ila for the Ba-ila; a Matabele for the Matabele. Now go, knowing that I weep for you—you and your people who act like little children."

Kawiti saluted, turned and marched back to his quarters.

*Thaba-en-basila: Woman's Mountain. So called because in a fight waged nearby, the women of the Bashilangi fought beside their menfolk and helped inflict a severe defeat on the Matabele.

THE sergeant sighed heavily, conscious that a crisis was approaching in his dealing with the men of his command which would make all the other difficulties he had had to surmount seem no more than pin pricks of annoyance in comparison. He frowned at the sight of another man coming across the parade ground.

He was not such a tall man as the Matabele, Kawiti. But his shoulders were broader; he seemed to be more sturdily built; his walk was one of arrogant confidence. He came to a halt and waited for permission to speak, as Kawiti had done. He, too, wore a corporal's chevrons.

"What is it, Corporal Mukadi?" the sergeant asked, speaking very slowly, for his knowledge of the Ba-ila language was still elementary.

He listened intently to the spate of words to which Mukadi gave utterance, understanding only a word here and there; yet understanding sufficient, because of his knowledge of the situation which existed in the ranks of the Black Watch, to know that Mukadi was making a complaint similar to that of Kawiti's.

He knew that Mukadi was speaking slightingly of the Matabele. When he spoke of the battle at Woman's Mountain, the sergeant managed to check, for a moment, the flood of impassioned oratory. He reminded Mukadi that not always had his people succeeded in conquering the Matabele. He reminded the native of the occasions when the Matabele raids had been successful, tried to point the moral that Matabele and Ba-ila were men; that neither one or the other could claim a definite superiority.

Referring occasionally to the vocabulary at the end of the book he had been studying, the sergeant tried to give Mukadi the same words he had given to Kawiti; he endeavored to apportion, equally, the annoyance he felt at the constant squabbling which existed between the two tribes. He concluded aptly with the Ba-ila proverb which runs, "An ax shaft is made out of an ordinary piece of

wood," giving Mukadi to understand that any man can be made of great use, whether he be of one tribe or another. But, on the other hand, he is not essential for, like an ax shaft, he is of use only in connection with others. Just as an ax is useless without the shaft; or the shaft without the head.

But though Mukadi smiled polite appreciation of the point the sergeant had made, though he saluted respectfully, the sergeant knew the matter could not be easily settled, and for a long time after Mukadi had departed to his quarters he sat staring hopelessly before him.

Never, since the early days when he had first come out from England from a crack line regiment, to instruct the warriors of a savage race, had he felt so utterly alone and helpless.

The O. C. who had been in command when he had first joined the regiment had retired; the adjutant, Captain Cartwright, who had been one of his staunchest supporters in the stormy days of his beginnings, had been transferred to a troop far distant from headquarters. The new O. C. was utterly lacking in sympathy or understanding of the sergeant's problems—problems which had been increased by the O. C's misguided zeal. It had been the new O. C's idea to add men of the Ba-ila tribe to the ranks of the Black Watch.

"The Ba-ila," he had told the sergeant, "will stiffen the Matabele. The friendly rivalry—" friendly had been the O. C's word—"between the two races, will be good for the corps."

"If your men are all of one tribe," the O. C. had pointed out, answering the sergeant's objections, "there is nothing to stop them from getting together and plotting. And your Matabele are an arrogant and stiff necked crowd. I've heard them boast that they've never been beaten by the white men in battle. That train of thought, Sergeant, is dangerous.

"But now you have a leavening of the Ba-ila—their old enemies—there'll be less likelihood of their plotting; less danger of a rebellion against white rule."

It had been useless for the sergeant to point out that if the Matabele wanted to plot or mutiny, the presence of the Ba-ila would not stop them. It was still more fruitless for him to dilate on the dangers of setting one crowd of men to spy upon another.

Finally, recognizing the futility of anything he might say, he had applied himself to the task of breaking down ancient racial rivalries and the barriers of tradition, customs and religion which existed between the two races. His task was to eradicate vices, and develop the virtues, of both races. He had to weld them into a unit which, outwardly, at any rate, knew no totem but the flag under which it served; had no taboos other than those imposed by military discipline, and whose traditions were yet in the making.

It was a task which tried his tact and his knowledge of men to the utmost.

Scarcely an hour of the day passed that did not see him called upon to intervene in some petty squabble or other.

He was forced continually to be on guard, lest a word of praise addressed to one man be taken as a word of condemnation to another. His judgments were weighed and examined with the fear ever present in the minds of the examiners that he was treating one race more harshly than another; giving the Matabele privileges that he would not allow the Ba-ila.

He wondered how long it would last. Tugged now this way, now that, he felt that the time must surely come when he would be forced to side with one or the other. He felt that he was a bone of contention between two snarling dogs.

He was shaken out of these pessimistic thoughts and fears by the arrival of Sam Peters.

PETERS was a bullet headed, grizzled old reprobate who had amassed a sizable fortune during a long lifetime of trading up and down South Africa. But despite his wealth he still lived, looked and acted

like a sundowner. Though he daily cursed Africa and her manifold discomforts, he could not leave her; he had become part of her. At different times, at widely diverse places, his blood had watered her soil. He had fought through four major rebellions and minor uprisings beyond reckoning. His body was covered with scars and each scar was, as it were, an illustration of some epic fight.

But, most important from the sergeant's point of view—the sergeant having earned the old fellow's friendship by taking him home one night after finding him drunk on the veld—Peters knew Africa and many of its thousand and one tongues—especially the Ba-ila dialects. And he came to the camp daily to give the sergeant an hour or so of instruction.

After a usual interchange of greetings this morning, the lesson began.

Old Peter's methods would have scandalized any missionary, but they were sound and very thorough. From him the sergeant learned the Rabelaisian stories and riddles which form so great a part of the social life of the people. Peters taught him to make pungent puns; explained certain customs to him and discoursed, in his own racy, inimitable way, on the origin of those customs. The sergeant learned by heart a long list of compliments and a still longer list of insults.

"You're not doin' so bad, my boy," Peters commented at the end of the lesson. "But you'll never get to know what's goin' on in a nigger's mind, what's back of his mind, until you take a woman into your hut. How else, do you suppose, I know all the dialects I do?"

The sergeant smiled.

"You must have kept a harem in your day, Sam," he observed.

The old man nodded.

"In a manner, I did. But I kept 'em scattered. An' it was all by way of business, you understand. But speaking plainly, as man to man, you ain't the sort of chap that can afford to get your knowledge that way. You'd lose more than you gained. Now with me it didn't matter so much. I was on my own. Making an' honest trade with niggers for ivory an' the like.

"But your job. To make a go of it, you've got to have their respect. An' if you have a woman—" He brushed the palms of his horny hands together.

The sergeant nodded.

"I discovered that, Sam, when I first came out here."

"I knew that," Peters said with a kindly contempt. "You've got the Matabele talk pretty good. But it's evident you didn't get it from their women."

The sergeant nodded absently. He was looking toward the quarters of the Black Watch, wondering what trouble was brewing for him there. He started as Peters said:

"Stop worrying, lad. Life's too short."

"I'm thinking, Sam," the sergeant replied slowly, conscious that he was making a confession of failure, "of using one of your tickets home."

He was referring to the well known fact that at least once a month Peters publicly said goodby to Africa, at the same time booking his passage on a de luxe train to Cape Town and a first class cabin on one of the Union-Castle boats to England. But the tickets, of course, were never used. Sometimes Peters remembered in time and canceled them. Not infrequently Peters presented them to an underpaid civil servant, going home on leave; or to a down-and-out, broken by Africa derelict.

"I've got no tickets for you," he said sharply. "You'd better tell me all about it."

The sergeant told him, finding relief in the telling; wondering why he hadn't confided his troubles to old Peters before this.

"It sounds as if I'm making a mountain out of a molehill," he concluded with a sharp laugh. "But there it is."

"There's plenty of dirt to make a damned big mountain," Peters observed cryptically. "But it's your *indaba*. Nobody can help you. Listen—I want to tell you something:

"I once had a pair of trek oxen. Strong

as elephants they was. Black bulls they was. I got 'em from a fellow who went broke. He didn't tell me what broke him. I found out afterwards. It was them two trek oxen as done it. Just as they'd broke other men afore him.

"They was as good beasts as would delight any man's eye—taken separately an' alone, you understand. With a span they was hell. They was always fighting to see which was boss an' they got the rest of the span taking sides. It didn't matter where I put them two beasts in the span they'd raise Cain. If one'd take it into his fool head to pull, the other—an', of course, his crowd—'ud hang back. If one tried to swing to the left, the other 'ud go to the right. If I got a couple of miles in a day's trek I could count myself lucky.

"An' the way we'd traveled was littered with broken trek gear.

"More'n once I took my rifle an' made ready to shoot 'em. But they was good, well blooded beasts, an' I didn't have the heart to. I was obstinate. I wasn't goin' to be beaten by a couple of dumb beasts.

"SO I PERSEVERED. I had special trek gear made that they couldn't break. I yoked 'em together with a bar of steel. I made them two my wheelers. Inspanned 'em side by side—an' worked 'em hard. But no harder, I'm telling you, boy, than they worked me. There didn't seem a thing they'd agree on to do together except fight. One or other of 'em 'ud lay down on the job in the tightest places you can think.

"Beating 'em didn't do any good, nor petting either. I cut bits out of their hide. I fed 'em with sugar till all the bees in Africa could have made honey from their sweat.

"One day we came to Bushman's Drift on the Kafue River. The road leading down to the drift on either side was hubdeep stinking mud. The river bed was littered with boulders an' the river was rising—fast. 'Course, I hadn't ought to tried it. But if I didn't cross then I'd be hung up maybe a week or more waiting for the river to go down. Besides which, for the past mile or so them two wheelers of mine had been acting like Christian folk.

"Now owing to the steep banks an' the difficulty of keeping a span in a straight line, it is well nigh impossible to make that crossing at Bushman's Drift with a full span. Most transport riders cross with four or six head at the most. Me—I decided to go one better. I was going to make my two wheelers take the wagon over alone. I knew they'd got the strength, the skill an' the guts to do it if so be they'd pull together.

"So I unyoked fourteen of my beasts an' sent 'em across with my niggers. The water was up to their bellies an' rising. The current was running strong, too, the niggers shouted. But I knew that. It was foaming about the rocks.

"Maybe I'd have decided not to try it after all but them two bulls took it out of my hands.

"Without a word from me, they all of a sudden lurched forward—I nearly fell off the driver's seat, I was so taken aback—an' took that heavy wagon at a lumbering trot down to the river just as if there was no mud to hold 'em back. Before I knew what was what we was halfway across. An' then hell started.

"One tried to go upstream, the other down; an' if it wasn't for that steel bar they'd have gone their separate ways. Then one tried to go forward an' the other back. An' there was me clinging to the seat one moment, an' a-slammin' my whip the next, an' yelling like as if I'd gone mad all the time. But not a damn bit of good did it do.

"I was so mad I forgot to be afraid. An' there was plenty to be afraid of, let me tell you. The river was rising fast—it was level with the floor boards; the wagon swayed like as if it was a cradle on the treetop—an' I couldn't swim a stroke.

"Then one of them damned beasts sat down on his haunches like a dog an' the other, after trying to horn him, followed

suit. An' there they both sat.

"They looked, if you ask me, like as if they was fightin' a duel; seeing which could last the other out. An' the water was rising an' my whip was stinging 'em about their heads. Not that they cared a damn for that.

"Next thing I knew was the wagon being lifted up an' pounded down again on the rocks, and bales of goods was floating out through the opening in the canvas hood at the back. Then—it must have been the flood waters of a tributary a bit higher up—I saw a wall of water come rushing down. Two or three feet it was above the river level. It looked sixty.

"It caught us broadside on, all but tipped the wagon over, an' washed over the heads of the two bulls. The next thing I knew we was turned round, heading downstream in deep water. The beasts was swimming strong an' heading the same way. That was something, but not much. Thought I'd never seen so much water in all my life.

"To make matters worse there was some falls ahead. I figured my number was up. An' I couldn't do nothing. I was in the hands, as you might say, of them two damned fool bulls. You can't tell me, either, that they didn't know what was ahead of 'em. A trip over them falls'd have smashed even their big bodies to pulp. They *must* have known it.

"Anyway, we came presently to where the current wasn't running quite so fast. The beasts took their only chance; they headed across the stream for the bank where my niggers stood yelling.

"How they did it I don't know. Point is, they did it. They swam to the bank, an' it was a slow, hard swim. The bank was pretty steep an' no foothold to speak of. But them two bulls used their wisdom, their strength an' their guts. What's more, they worked together. They had to. Love of life's strong in animals as well as men.

"An' they made it. Despite the steep bank, the tug of the river, the rotten foothold an' the dead weight of the wagon, they made it! They fought their way up the bank. Inch by inch, as you might say. They pulled together, they rested together—but when they rested they hung on to the ground they'd gained. An' when they got on top, on to level ground, they set off at a trot an' didn't stop until the river's roar was only a faint whisper behind us.

"They collapsed then, together. I thought they was dead, for a bit. But me an' the niggers worked over them like as if they was sick babies. We brought 'em round. When we turned 'em loose to graze that night they stuck together like a pair of turtle doves. Pretty as a picture, it was, the way they muzzled each other. An' I never had a bit of trouble with 'em after that.

"Well, got to be goin'. An' about those tickets, lad. You can have 'em if you want 'em . . ."

"Thanks, Sam," the sergeant replied thoughtfully. "I'm sticking. The rains have got to come sometime soon. Thanks for telling me about the bulls."

"Oh, that!" Sam Peters shrugged his shoulders. "I'm getting old, lad, an' I like talking. But as long as you understand— So long! Won't be seeing you for a couple of weeks. Going north."

He waved a farewell and shuffled away across the parade ground.

DURING the next week the sergeant, subconsciously influenced no doubt by Sam Peters' story of the trek oxen, tightened the reins of discipline. Hitherto he had held them in a slack hand, a velvet glove softening a grip of steel. But now the glove was discarded.

It had been his custom to talk freely with the men; he had encouraged them to come to him with their personal troubles. He had been a kind and understanding tutor, rather than a superior officer.

But now he withdrew himself from them; his treatment of them became strictly impersonal. He spoke to them

in curt, crisp sentences; his manner was as unbending as the spine which stiffened his back. The little things, the little breaches of discipline which he had hitherto overlooked, he now treated as faults and administered punishment.

He demanded at all times the utmost his men could give him. He drilled them hard and often. He increased their hours of duty and the number of fatigues. He became, overnight, a martinet.

Strangely enough, the men reacted favorably to this tightening of discipline. Always smart, they became even smarter. Their drill had an added snap to it.

The fact that they responded so well to the new régime was a tribute to the affection and esteem they had for the red headed, slim little man who was—as they themselves expressed it—at once their father, their brother and God. Matabele and Bashilangi alike felt this way toward him. They sensed—as primitive people and children can—his innate courage, decency and wisdom which could not be hid by uniform or color. They undoubtedly regretted their man's change of attitude toward them and submitted cheerfully to the discipline he imposed, in the hope that they could regain his affection.

But they could not forget their own private feud. The rivalry between them, the old racial hatred, was intensified by the fact that during these days it was permitted no outlet of any sort.

On parade they appeared as a unified body of men. Off the parade ground they had nothing in common. Once their day's duty was over, they discarded their uniforms and reverted to their national dress—which is practically no dress at all. And yet a dress which, perhaps only in the tying of the loin cloth knot, definitely set them apart from one another.

They drew their rations and ate at different hours.

If the men of one tribe sang the songs of their people, the men of the other would sing their songs still louder. If one group danced to the beating of tom-toms, the other would beat their tom-toms too, but in an entirely different tempo, producing a wild, rhythmless discord . . .

The sergeant was not blind to the course things were taking. And he only listened politely, with the proper dutiful smiles of appreciation, when the O. C, judging purely from surface results, complimented him on the way he was bringing the Black Watch along.

The O. C, of course, took some of the credit to himself.

"I knew, Sergeant," he said, somewhat patronizingly, "that my Bashilangi would do the trick. They're born soldiers. They take to discipline like a duck takes to water. They've given your Matabele the solidity they needed."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant had said.

But, before dismissing the parade which had elicited these compliments from the O. C, he stood silently before his men, wishing that he could read what was going on in the back of their minds.

They stood there, staring fixedly before them, their bayoneted rifles at the slope, each at identically the same angle; their red fezes tilted slightly to the right, the tassels arranged just so; the brass buttons of their blue tunics gleaming like gold; their khaki shorts spotless, with razor edged creases; their black limbs gleaming like polished mahogany.

They were lined up with the tallest men at the ends, grading to the smallest at the center. Not that the smallest was so very small. He overtopped the sergeant by a head at least. But there they were, graded according to size with no thought of racial barriers: Bashilangi and Matabele, touching shoulders, united by the bonds of discipline.

The sergeant drew a deep breath and wished that he could believe that things were as quiet under the surface as they appeared outwardly.

"Parade!" he shouted.

He was conscious of a preparatory stiffening of the lines of men. That stiffening which told him that the men

were on the alert; their minds his, ready to obey, on the instant, the command that would follow the preliminary warning.

"Dismiss!"

The men made a right turn, halted the requisite few moments, and hastened to their quarters. In the moment of their falling out they immediately ceased their existence as a whole. The Bashilangi flocked together and left the parade ground at the upper end; the Matabele at the lower.

THAT evening after retreat the smoldering fires of hate, battening in the minds of men made inflammable by a lack of the water of understanding, broke out with a devastating fury.

It was a little thing which brought matters to a head. It was no more, by way of comparison, than a carelessly discarded cigaret butt which causes sweeping bush fires. No more than Kawiti saying, speaking of Mukadi, in a voice loud enough to be heard by a passing Bashilangi—

"He is like a man who drinks hurriedly without taking the bits of dirt out of his milk."

Perhaps it was not such a little thing after all, for Kawiti's words accused his brother corporal of being a *shapowe*, a foul talker. A grave charge that, according to the Bashilangi way of looking at things.

When Mukadi heard of it he came back with the accusation—

"Corporal Kawiti draws in his belly like one who fords a deep river."

And to that accusation of cowardice there was, of course, only one response possible. Kawiti answered it with a challenge. The challenge was taken up, and immediately the two corporals, armed with knobkerries, were the center of a ring of wildly excited natives.

With the first exchange of blows they no longer fought alone. The clash of stick upon stick gave the others the cue for which they had so long waited. In a very short space of time the open ground between the huts of the native police was filled with fighting men.

It was as fierce and bitter a fight as had ever been waged between the warriors of two tribes. Only the fact that they were armed with knobkerries and not *assegais* prevented the fight from becoming a lethal affair. As it was, the dull thud of the knobbed sticks on naked bodies left a tale of broken heads and ribs.

The air rang with wild warcries, the screams of infuriated women and the wailings of frightened children. For a little while it seemed as if the fight at Woman's Mountain were to be duplicated here in miniature, for the women of the Bashilangi rushed to the assistance of their men folk.

Thus reenforced, the Bashilangi gained the upper hand until the wives of the Matabele, taking the cue from their rivals, rushed to the succor of their men.

It was at that point that the sergeant appeared on the scene. His shouted commands falling on deaf ears, he stood for a moment, a somewhat pathetic figure, looking at what might well be the destruction of all his work.

One or two men were down. They were unconscious of the fight which waged over them. The awkward postures of several indicated bruised, if not broken ribs.

And finally he noted that the two corporals, Kawiti and Mukadi, were fighting with all the craft and skill which was at their command. Apparently it was a matter of mutual consent between the combating forces that these two men should fight out their differences unhampered by friend or foe.

They were well matched. Kawiti's superior height was counterbalanced by Mukadi's greater strength. As for skill in the use of their weapons, there was nothing to choose between them. And because of this equality, save for superficial bruises, both men were as yet unharmed.

The sergeant was half inclined to let

the two opposing forces fight it out to the bitter end, hoping that once this fight was out of their systems the men would settle down and work together amicably. But he knew that was a false hope. The victors would never cease to triumph over their victory; the losers would never cease to plan a way whereby they could wipe out the stain of defeat.

And then the sergeant was conscious of a growing excitement over in the quarters of the white police. He heard the shrill of whistles summoning the white troopers for parade. And at that thought the sergeant's ire was roused. He was determined to settle the *indaba* himself; an *indaba* which was, after all, his own.

The fortunes of the fight at that moment brought two men close to him. They were both buglers. He smiled grimly as he thought how appropriate it was that these two should have singled each other out. Their bugling had always been an additional rivalry between them to that of race.

The sergeant struck both of them a sharp blow across the shoulders with his gold headed swagger cane—that cane which was a symbol to them of his justice and power. They turned on him with sharp howls of rage at the sting of the blows. When they saw that the sergeant was their assailant, they gaped at him shamefacedly; they muttered apologies and pleas for forgiveness.

"Get your bugles, quickly," he said in a cold, decisive tone.

THEY did not hesitate. The bond of discipline which he had tightened about them held them fast. They saluted and departed at a run to obey his commands. Quickened by a sense of rivalry, they raced each other to see who should be first back.

Yet each delayed long enough to put on his uniform. When they returned to the sergeant, at almost identically the same moment, they were both smartly dressed in full parade order.

"Sound the 'fall in'," the sergeant ordered.

At the first brazen note there was a definite and appreciable slackening of the fury of the fights which were being waged. Before the call had trembled away into silence, at least half of the men had formed into line. The women ran shrieking to their huts. The bugles' note had told them that this had now become an affair of the regiment; in such matters it was taboo for them to take part.

"Sound the call again," the sergeant ordered, his eyes on the two corporals. This time every man who was capable of obeying, fell into line. Even those who had been beaten to the ground endeavored to crawl to the gaps in the ranks which proclaimed their absence.

The two corporals took up their proper positions and the men waited uneasily for the wrath they felt was due to descend upon them. They, too, could hear now the sounds which came from the parade ground of the white police. They heard the shouted orders; presently they heard the tramp of marching men.

The sergeant ordered the women to take away the wounded and keep them out of sight in the huts.

That done, the sergeant lashed the men with his voice, sparing none, making no difference between Bashilangi and Matabele; between Kawiti and Mukadi. He stunned them with the force of his insults. He angered them with his scornful contempt. And finally he poured upon them a cold flood of passionless invective, which left them gasping and feeling like little children.

Before they had time to recover from that, he stirred them into movement with a quick succession of staccato orders—

"From the right, number!"

"Form fours!"

"Fours—right!"

"Quick—march!"

"Double!"

He took them on to the parade ground and sent them round and round, back

and forth, giving them no respite; changing from the "double" to the strenuous "knees up"; from "knees up" to the "gymnastic walk".

Still with no period of rest, he put them through setting up exercises . . .

And so, when the O. C, leading a force of white troopers to quell what was supposed to be a mutiny of the Black Watch, came upon the scene, he saw nothing to justify his alarm; nothing more alarming than ranks of stern faced, ebony skinned warriors performing grotesque evolutions, while the white faced, red headed little sergeant who stood in front of them shouted at them to put more guts into it, and kept up a string of uncomplimentary remarks regarding the morals of their immediate ancestors.

But the affair was not to end there. Next morning the sergeant was hailed before an irate O. C. and called upon to give an account of the disturbance of the preceding night. Had it not been, perhaps, for the numbers of injured, the sergeant might have been constrained to lie out of his difficulty. Not in order to save himself from the O. C's wrath, but to save his men from the consequences of their folly.

But faced with the long list of men who had been forced to report sick, the sergeant knew that it would be foolish to endeavor to pass off the affray as a friendly passage of arms.

Consequently the O. C. got the full spate of the sergeant's grievances and, before that man was through, a thorough understanding of the difficulties with which the sergeant had had to contend. His reaction was immediate and decisive:

"There's only one answer to it, sergeant," he said. "I made a mistake in bringing the Bashilangi down here—I see that now. We'll send the Bashilangi back, and you shall carry on with the Matabele."

He was amazed at the sergeant's reception of his surrender.

"That is admitting defeat," the sergeant objected. "I'd never be able to do anything with the Matabele if we sent the Bashilangi away. They'd think they'd forced my hand. What's more, sir, if we send the Bashilangi away they'll go back and spread the news among their people that we'd got rid of them because they'd licked the Matabele. And you know how talk like that'd spread. It might mean the beginning of another inter-tribal war. It—"

"Oh, damn it, Sergeant!" the O. C. interrupted testily. "What are you getting at? You make a long, heated complaint about the folly of trying to mix Matabele and Bashilangi. When I confess I was wrong, and am ready to rectify the trouble, you won't stand for that either. Just what is it you do want?"

"I'd like, sir," the sergeant said slowly, "to work with them until I've got them pulling together. I'm looking on 'em, sir, as an awkward squad, and I have, sir, if you'll excuse me saying so, handled a lot of awkward squads in my time."

The O. C. nodded.

"It's become a matter of pride with you, eh, Sergeant?" he said.

"More than that, sir," the sergeant replied. "I see it as a job to be done. And, sir—" he pronounced the words with meticulous care, for the O. C. knew the Bashilangi dialect as well as any man—"*Bushiku bomwi tabubozha muzovu.*"*

The O. C. laughed.

"Which is the same as saying, Sergeant, 'Rome was not built in a day'. Very well. But what's your next step?"

"In a way, sir," the sergeant said earnestly, "it's a case of kill or cure; mend or break. Things are too soft for the men here at headquarters. They haven't got enough to keep them occupied. I've been giving 'em extra drills an' fatigues, but after a bit, sir, as you know, that'll turn in a man's stomach an' sour him. In any case, they ain't got a chance of really getting to know each other. Because one man's buttons shine as bright as another's, that's no proof the men are equal. A coward can slope arms as

*One day is not sufficient to rot an elephant.

smartly as a brave man."

"Well?" the O. C. queried, as the sergeant hesitated. "Where does all this lead to?"

"I'd like to take 'em out on the veld, sir; a three or four-week patrol, say, an' lose 'em, an' let 'em find themselves."

"You'd be taking a big chance, Sergeant. Still, it might work. How about rations?"

"Each man will carry sufficient for two days, sir."

"But I thought you said you were going to stay out two or three weeks?"

The sergeant nodded grimly.

"That was my plan, sir. We'll eat off the country. An' where I'm planning to take them, they'll find it poor picking, an' not too much water until the rains come."

"Very well, Sergeant," the O. C. agreed. "You have my consent to put this plan of yours into operation. But I make this condition—your men must go unarmed. They can carry knobkerries, but no rifles or bayonets."

And with that the O. C. put the matter out of his mind. A great personage was on his way out from England to inspect the work of his force. There were reviews to be arranged; escorts to be picked and drilled . . .

In comparison with the manifold duties which the visit of a great personage always inflicts on O. C's, the welfare of a lone white noncom and the black men in his charge is a matter of little importance.

IT WAS a typical Mashona *kraal*: a collection of tumbledown, vermin ridden huts built with little order or permanence, scattered about the lower slopes of a rocky *kopje;* a *kopje* honeycombed by a series of caves to which, in other days—before the white man had established an era of peace and security in the country—the inhabitants had been wont to seek sanctuary during the frequent raids of the more warlike tribes surrounding them.

And the headman who stood cringingly before the sergeant was a typical Mashona headman, greasy, potbellied, glib of tongue and, undoubtedly, a great liar.

This headman was apparently very frank and open in his replies to the questions addressed to him by the white man. Apparently he had only the greatest respect for the sergeant, and the uniform he wore, a respect, moreover, which he seemed more than willing to extend to the two corporals—Kawiti and Mukadi who flanked the sergeant on either hand.

His attitude was that of a man anxious to please, and generally regretful that the resources at his command were such as to render him impotent to give the required assistance.

"Truly," he said, in answer to the sergeant's query. "I have grain. I will show it to the white Lord."

He led the sergeant to a grain hut built on top of a flat rock, and exhibited its contents—a small heap of moldy grain.

The sergeant sniffed in disgust at the smell of it. Even had there been a large supply, large enough to warrant his requisitioning it, his men would not have touched it, hungry though they were.

"Is that all you have?" he asked sternly.

"Truly," the headman replied. "The crops have been bad. But the little that is here you are welcome to, even though my people go hungry. For who are we that we should eat while the white man, and the mighty warriors who follow him, go hungry?"

"He lies," Kawiti on the sergeant's right muttered. "The dog lies."

And Mukadi on the left echoed:

"He lies. Let me deal with him and I will find out the truth."

The sergeant, having observed the fat, well conditioned urchins who played about the *kraal,* knew the headman lied. But there was nothing he could do.

He silenced the muttered counsels of his two corporals with a sharp command. He could not take by force from the

Mashonas what they were unwilling for him to have; he could not compel them to hand over their store of grain. He asked for water.

The headman led the way to the waterhole, protesting that the white man was welcome to all their grain supplies, regretting that he was not a wealthy headman so that he could entertain the white man and those who followed him.

The stench of the waterhole stung their nostrils before they got to it, and contained no more than would fill a good sized gourd: a slimy, stinking liquid which seemed to have reached the stage of ebullition. But that illusion of boiling, the ceaseless "bubbling", was due solely to the gyratory movements of the myriad insects whose universe it was.

Sickened, the sergeant turned away quickly. At a half strangled cry and a yelp for help, he turned again just in time to see Mukadi and Kawiti pick up the headman and pitch him headfirst into the ooze surrounding the waterhole.

For a moment the stern lines of his lips changed and the harassed look of anxiety left his eyes. Inwardly he chuckled.

Before he could take any action, the headman clambered up out of the waterhole and ran shrieking up the hillside, followed by all the people of the *kraal* and, gaining the security of the caves, shouted filthy insults at the interlopers.

Followed in sulky silence by the two corporals, the sergeant led the way down to the valley at the foot of the hill where the men of his command waited. A few moments later and they were on trek, heading for a group of *kopjes* four hours distant, where a larger *kraal* was situated. There the sergeant hoped to get provisions and water.

He marched at the head of his men with a quick, alert step, his carriage erect, almost jaunty. His uniform, though torn in places, was immaculately clean. He carried a revolver in a holster slung about his shoulders. In his right hand he held his gold headed swagger cane with which he pointed when he wished to change the direction of the line of march. His face was as devoid of emotion as the straight line of his back.

Three weeks had elapsed since he had left headquarters with sixty men on this experimental trek.

At first things had gone so smoothly that he had congratulated himself on an ultimate victory. But his congratulations had been premature. He had not understood how deep down the animosity between the two tribes went, any more than he had first understood the motives underlying their behavior.

As soon as they had exhausted the rations which they had taken with them from headquarters there had been, it seemed, an extraordinary lack of selfishness between the men of the two tribes. As soon as they had been reduced to living off the country, bargaining for grain from the *kraals* on their line of march—or where there were no kraals, hunting game which they killed with their throwing sticks—their rivalry had been satisfied by the competition which arose as to which tribe should prove the best foragers.

During that time the Matabele frequently went without food in order that the Bashilangi might have plenty to eat. The Bashilangi marched for two whole days without quenching their thirst in order that the Matabele might benefit.

The sergeant had thought that this exhibited a friendly spirit. He was not very long in discovering his mistake. The knowledge was soon brought home to him that the Matabele, for example, abstained from eating only in order to prove to the others what good providers they were.

Even when there was food and water in plenty for them all, they ate apart, as they slept apart. They kept themselves as distinctly apart as they had done at headquarters; as they had done before the diplomacy of the white men had brought them together.

The sergeant realized that that an-

cient rivalry was the only thing which kept them together. It was the only thing which kept them obedient to the discipline he inflicted; carrying on, despite the fact that most of the time they were parched for want of water, and their hunger belts drawn to the last hole. Their slogan seemed to be "What a Matabele can do, a Bashilangi can do." "What a Bashilangi can do, a Matabele can do."

Things should have been easier this last week. Never had they been more than a forenoon's trek away from a *kraal*. But their progress had been a series of disappointments. Even at the first Mashona *kraal* they had had difficulty in getting sufficient food and drink. At each *kraal* after that, the supplies had become less and less, reaching a climax at this *kraal* they had just visited.

The sergeant smiled grimly. He suspected that the Mashonas were aware of the dissension in the ranks of his men. It was a self-evident fact. And they were emboldened, too, by the knowledge that his men were unarmed save for the knobkerries they carried. The Mashonas might even have concluded that these sixty hungry, travel stained men were fugitives from the white men's justice. At any rate, there was nothing about them to instil fear into the hearts of the *kraal* people.

The sergeant was well aware that his own attitude had done much to bolster up the passive impertinences of the Mashonas.

If he had acted more firmly, if he had insisted—using force to back up his demands—he could have obtained plenty of food and water at any one of the *kraals* which had grudgingly parted with barely sufficient to ward off starvation.

His attitude might have lost him the respect of his men—except for the fact that they knew he was not actuated by fear. Not one of them suspected his motives.

And the Mashonas, slinking in the security of the hills, talked of avenging themselves upon this little body of weaponless men for all the raids they had suffered in the dim past of Africa's yesterday. Encouraged by the fact that their lies were accepted unchallenged, their impertinences unchecked, they began to plot. Even now the drums were talking in the hills. . . .

IT WAS nearing sunset when they came to the *kraal*—and found it deserted. But the ashes of the cook fires were still warm and though the huts were completely bare, they evidently had been occupied within the last hour or so.

The men scattered in search of food and water. The droppings indicated that the *kraal* was rich in cattle; there was a goat *scherm* of unusual size; there was plenty of evidence that scores of Kaffir fowl scratched a living from the *kraal's* refuse—but there was not a cow, or a goat, or a fowl to be seen.

The large grain store huts were swept bare; the only waterhole the sergeant's men could locate had been rendered undrinkable by the filth very recently thrown in it.

"They make a mock of us, *inkosi*," Kawiti reported when the men, answering the sergeant's whistle, abandoned their fruitless search. "They make a mock of us because of these Bashilangi dogs—"

"It is indeed you they mock," Mukadi countered heatedly. "They know you once ran from our women—"

"Silence!" the sergeant interposed sharply. "They mock us. They mock Bashilangi and Matabele. They also mock me! I say they mock the uniform we wear."

The two corporals glared angrily at each other. They had not accepted the sergeant's compromise. Even military discipline could not keep their mutual resentment under control much longer. Both men were on edge; worn thin by the privations and long treks; harassed by their efforts to keep the peace between their respective followers.

"What can we do?" Mukadi asked.

"There is nothing we can do," the sergeant replied. "Listen, if you were truly soldiers I would lead you into the caves against these Mashonas. We would smoke them out an' take what food an' drink we desired. But you are not men. You are only squabbling children."

"We are hungry, *inkosi.* The men are hungry and thirsty. What shall we tell them?"

"I, too, am hungry an' thirsty," the sergeant retorted. "Tell them that."

"Lead us against the Mashonas, *inkosi,*" Mukadi pleaded. "We will prove we are warriors and not children. At least, that I can promise for the Bashilangi."

"Go join the Mashonas, Mukadi," Kawiti taunted. "And we Matabele will show you how warriors fight."

The sergeant yawned.

"You weary me. You are all words. You are like dogs snarling over a bone. Aye. An' you both fear to snatch the bone. You have wearied my ears ever since this trek was started. Do you think I am deaf? All day—an' all the days—I have heard the taunts an' insults that have passed between you. 'Matabele dog!' says one. 'Bashilangi cur!' snarls the other. *Wo-we!* You are not soldiers of the Great White Queen. You wear her uniform, but what of that? A hyena once wore a lion's skin—an' he remained a hyena."

He held up his hands, silencing the heated protests they would have made.

"No more words. I am tired. Your foolish bickering has pulled me in two. Now go. As for me—" he turned toward the nearest hut—"I am going to sleep in there. Do not disturb me until the morning—or until wisdom has come to you."

"But you have not inspected the men, *inkosi,*" Mukadi objected.

"An' what of the sentries?" Kawiti added. "You have not appointed them or indicated their posts."

The sergeant sneered.

"Why should I inspect the Matabele an' Bashilangi? They are nothing to me. Why should I appoint sentries? I have authority only over the Black Watch—not over Matabele or Bashilangi. See to these things yourself, if you are of a mind to. It is all one to me."

He turned sharply on his heel and entered the hut, leaving the two corporals staring at each other in wide eyed consternation.

Then, actuated by the same purpose, both men suddenly hastened to join the rest of the men who had separated as usual and were eyeing each other suspiciously.

"Where do you go in such a hurry, Matabele?" Mukadi demanded.

"To inspect the men, chicken heart, and order the setting of sentries."

"Your bark is loud, Matabele. And who gave you such authority?"

"Are you deaf?" Kawiti asked coldly. "The *inkosi,* recognizing a man, gave me the authority. 'Do it yourself,' he said."

"To me he said that," Mukadi shouted.

Their voices were raised; they were hot with anger.

More words passed between them; biting insults, fiery challenges. Their men grouped behind them.

The Matabele sang one of their war chants, stamping their feet to its savage rhythm.

"See they are coming!
Elephants! Strangers!
Spoiling our lands.
Au-a! We eat them!
See there *Uzwidi* leading our *impis*
Hark to the singing—the singing of spears.
Ghee! Ghee! Ghee!
Haste to the slaughter.
Ghee!

The Bashilangi countered with a dance that was descriptive of the tortures they inflict on conquered enemies.

One of the Matabele shouted derisively:

"A dance of boasters—threatening more than they can perform. Be care-

ful, Bashilangi dogs. Your women are not at hand to help you now."

As if that were a signal the two parties took up their positions at opposite ends of the clearing. For a little while the corporals haranged them, whipping them with words to a beserk fury; magnifying their hate and distorting ancient grievances.

A moment later and they rushed at each other, grimly silent, determined to settle now, once for all, the question of superiority.

THE clash of their meeting was like the sudden upheaval caused by two mighty, opposing currents. So, too, were the consequent developments. After the first check, the two parties intermingled in a wild, whirlpool-like mêlée. Those on the outer edge circled about, endeavoring to fix on a definite opponent, but exchanging no more than two or three blows before the surging pulsations which emanated from the center separated them again.

Gradually the battle ground widened. The first massed attack broke up into a series of single combats.

Once again Kawiti and Mukadi faced each other—no longer corporals in the service of the White Queen but champions of rival races.

Their battling was fierce, and if one retreated for a space it was not so much a confession of weakness as clever strategy.

Once Mukadi actually turned and ran with Kawiti, shouting exultantly, at his heels. But reaching his objective, the stump of a tree about two feet high, Mukadi sprang on to it, pivoted swiftly and aimed a terrific blow at Kawiti's head.

Kawiti only just managed to parry the blow—which, had it landed, must have crushed his skull. As it was his left arm, flung swiftly upward, caught the full force of the blow.

The Matabele covered his involuntary groan of pain with a grunt as he put all his weight into a counter blow which thudded against Mukadi's ribs, knocking him backward off the tree stump. But Mukadi was on his feet again before Kawiti, slowed by the pain of his arm, could rush in to put a finish to the affair . . .

And as the corporals fought, so fought the men.

Here and there a man had fallen but neither side could claim a victory, or even a momentary advantage. The men were too well matched; and knobkerries, although they smash and bruise, are not, after all, killing weapons: there is scarcely a beer drink which does not end up in a battle with knobkerries. There is a tale of sore heads and bruised ribs on the morrow—little more.

At first the sergeant watched the fight through a crack in the mud wall of his hut. Later he stood openly in the doorway. Occasionally fighting men passed within an arm's length of him. But they were unconscious of his presence.

His face was drawn and haggard looking; his eyes were filled with the misery of doubt. He wondered if he was seeing the absolute ruin of all he had worked so hard to create. He questioned the wisdom of his own behavior.

He had deliberately planned for just this; had purposely belittled himself and his men in the eyes of the Mashonas; had inflicted the privations of hunger and thirst upon the men realizing that —especially in these last enervating days of the long drought—their tempers would become sharp, their sense of proportion distorted.

He had purposely acted today in a manner calculated to bring the sullen, brewing storm to a head. He had treated the two corporals in a manner that was bound to result in an open breach. And then he had left them to their own devices. It was as if he had been driving two high spirited horses, had lashed them cruelly, and then thrown away the reins of control.

His eyes rested for a moment on the two corporals and his fears increased

as he noted the elemental savagery of the fight they waged. It would not end, he realized, with one man being knocked down, unable to rise. The victor would not be satisfied until he had battered out his enemy's brains.

The sergeant considered the feasibility of attempting to bring the fighting to an end.

A blast on his whistle, shots from his revolver—would that, he wondered, stop them now? Would they recognize his authority over them. If he made the attempt, and failed, then his failure would be absolute—no matter how the fight ended.

The sergeant moved away from the cover of the hut and anxiously scrutinized the slopes of the *kopje* on which the *kraal* was built.

Nothing moved; only vague, indefinite shadows cast by the red, cloud filmed rays of the setting sun. The sergeant groaned. The weakness of his planning was brought home to him. His calculations had gone astray. He had set a tempting dish for the Mashonas—and they were too cowardly to take it.

He decided to make an attempt to end the fight; for the men's sake he resolved on that. If he succeeded, he would march them back to headquarters and begin all over again.

And now to put his personal hold over the men to the test!

He would try a blast on his whistle first; if that failed, a revolver shot. If that failed to pierce their hate deafened ears, then would be time for him to go among them to appeal to individuals. But at the last moment as he took the whistle down from his lips, he smiled grimly. The game was to be played as he had planned after all.

HIS keen eyes, focused by the flash of metal in the sun's rays, had seen a man crawling down the *kopje*. He carried an *assegai* in his hands. And he was not alone. The *kopje* was alive with men, creeping stealthily downward, converging on the *kraal;* snaking their way across open spaces; making swift rushes from boulder to boulder. Only the one carried an *assegai*. The sergeant sighed with relief. He had counted on that. It would have been fatal to everything had the Mashonas disobeyed the law which forbids them to own spears. But they all had knobkerries.

Unseen, save for the sergeant, they reached the *kraal* and surrounded it. Then the sergeant could see them no longer. They were, he decided, hiding in the long grass or behind huts, waiting for a prearranged signal before launching their attack.

The cry of the go-away bird sounded, was repeated.

The next moment the Mashonas rushed from their hiding places and attacked the fighting men, anticipating an easy victory. And for a little while the sergeant was content with the rôle of a spectator. He saw two of his men, grappling together in a strangle hold, go down before the attacks of Mashonas. They continued their private grudge, rolling over and over, snarling like dogs.

Here and there he saw men, erstwhile enemies, standing back to back and putting up so stout a fight that the Mashonas who surrounded them could not get past their guard. He saw Kawiti leap sidewise and crash his knobkerry down on the head of the Mashona who carried an *assegai*, just as that man was about to stab Mukadi in the back. The next moment Kawiti fell, stunned by a piece of rock which, shrewdly aimed, struck him on the temple.

The sergeant saw Mukadi turn wrathfully to curse—as he supposed—the Bashilangi who had dared to interfere in his fight. And he laughed aloud at the look on Mukadi's face as a realization of what had happened—what was happening—came to him.

Before yelling Mashonas could rush in to make an end of Kawiti, Mukadi was standing astride the Matabele's prostrate body and the Mashonas halted, intimidated. This was some-

thing they could not understand.

Some of them were beginning to doubt the wisdom of their attack. It had seemed so simple to gain a victory over men who were fighting each other. It had been beyond the region of their imagination that those men would show a united front. And the Mashonas are not a warrior race. But they still fought fiercely; the advantage of numbers and surprise was theirs.

The soldiers were scattered. Here and there men, who had not yet realized that they were attacked by the Mashonas, still fought each other. But the majority of them had forgotten their old rivalry and had united against a common foe.

All this the sergeant saw in quicker time than the telling of it and before the men who surrounded Mukadi could work up sufficient courage to make a concerted attack the sergeant was beside his corporal, sounding the rallying call on his whistle.

Kawiti struggled to his feet.

"Thanks, Mukadi," he said with a sheepish grin, understanding that the Bashilangi had saved his life.

"Thanks to you, warrior," Mukadi grunted his reply. He knew that Kawiti had saved him from being stabbed in the back.

"It was a good fight," Kawiti gasped. "But this is better."

As he spoke he leaped forward, taking the fight to the Mashonas. Mukadi was at his side. Their knobkerries rose and fell in unison. They called the tally of their victims.

"One!" cried Kawiti.

"Two!" Mukadi's deep voice echoed.

"Three!"

"A good blow, warrior!"

"Four! Guard on your right."

Answering the sergeant's rallying signal, the men of the Black Watch fought their way doggedly to where he stood like spokes to the hub of a wheel. They cut lanes through the undisciplined horde of Mashonas who tried to bar their way. They beat them down as easily as if they were no more than reeds which guard a waterhole on the open veld. If a Matabele stumbled, a Bashilangi was on hand to help him to his feet. If a Bashilangi fell, a Matabele fought off the Mashonas giving his comrade a chance to recover . . .

Nothing, it seemed, could stop them from answering the shrill call of the sergeant's whistle. Certainly these puny Mashonas couldn't!

They formed orderly ranks before the sergeant; they were battle scarred, bruised and bleeding, their uniforms were in rags; the weapons of many were broken. But a glowing consciousness of comradeship was salve to their hurts; the dignity of discipline clothed them; unity was their armor.

The two corporals, grinning at the damage they had executed, took up their positions.

"Par'ade—attention!"

The Mashonas, awed by the precision of a disciplined force, watched with amazement. They did not understand what had taken place. Some thought the white man, acknowledging defeat, was going to march his men from the *kraal.* They showered stones and filth on the Black Watch.

"Men of the Black Watch—" the sergeant had to shout to make his voice heard above the jeering cries of the Mashonas—"these Mashonas have lied to us. They have denied us food an' drink. In their folly, thinking we fought among ourselves, they dared to attack. *Wo-we!* Being fools, how were they to know it was only a trap we set for them?" He commented with an inward chuckle on the change of expression which appeared on the faces of the men. They had readily accepted the explanation he had given them. Already they were believing that this fight of theirs was, in fact, a prearranged plot to bring the Mashonas from their caves. "Because they are fools," he continued, "there must be no killing. Take all you can prisoners an' bring them before me. We eat an' drink tonight. Hasten, be-

fore darkness hides them."

The Black Watch moved forward at the double, shouting the battle cry he had given them.

"Forward! Forward!"

Too late the Mashonas realized that they were now opposed to the strength of unity, backed up by white man's prestige. Some few fought with the desperate courage of cornered rats; some few found safety in flight.

The majority quickly capitulated, overawed by the massed attack of the Black Watch. And by the time the sergeant had recovered sufficiently to rise, assisted by the two corporals who had not joined the attack, it was all over. The Black Watch were herding their prisoners toward him.

IT WAS a week later. The sergeant marched at the head of his men across the commonage which surrounded the headquarters camp. The men were singing, full throatedly, the song of the Black Watch, a song which had been evolved on the night of their victory over the Mashonas; the night of the greater victory over themselves. They were a disreputable looking crowd. Not a few marched with a painful limp; three were carried on crude stretchers. They waved their knobkerries in response to the greeting of the women who had come out to meet them.

As they debouched upon the parade ground in a ragged column of fours the sergeant saw the O.C. standing against the flag pole. With him was a stranger in a scarlet and gold uniform.

The sergeant was about to shout the order which would reduce his men to silence, when a terrific confusion of voices sounded at the rear of the column; anger filled voices and jeering laughter; the screams of a woman and the sound of blows. Cursing, he ran back to the scene of conflict.

He saw Kawiti seated astride the broad back of his wife, who was lying face downward on the veld, smacking her fatness with the flat of his hand.

"What is the meaning of this?" the sergeant demanded sharply.

Mukadi answered him.

"Being a woman, *inkosi,* she remembers only the old taboos, the old hates. She shouted insults at us. Kawiti—and she is his heifer—teaches her that there is now no hate and only one taboo."

"An' that is?" the sergeant asked.

"That to insult one of us is to insult us all." Mukadi glared at the women of his own tribe. "Remember that, you black cows," he said. "And to aid your memory your men shall deal with you before the setting of the sun as Kawiti deals now with his wife."

The sergeant laughed softly.

With a start he realized that the head of the straggling column was now opposite the saluting point. His whistle blew. Orders followed, and he ran to take up his position at the head of the line. But the O.C. had led the great personage away. The great personage had made no objections. He was not interested in reviewing a mob of sweat stained natives."

"What a funny little man, Colonel," he commented lightly, "that was in charge of those natives."

"He's one of the old type of noncoms, sir," the O.C. said.

"Ah! Just so. An excellent man, no doubt, in his proper sphere. But it's impossible, I imagine, to do anything with such raw material. To revert to the suggested change of uniform . . . "

And so there was no one to take the salute of the sergeant's men. Only the flag which fluttered at the top of the tall white pole. But the sergeant—though he knew that the O. C's departure was an expression of angry disapproval—was well content. He did not look for appreciation or understanding. He did not, even, indulge in self-congratulation.

There was still so much to do; so much heart breaking labor and dashing of hopes; so much shaping and polishing. But the welding—that was complete and perfect.

The DEVIL DANCERS

Strange Adventures of the Newsreel Men —by One of Them

CHARLES PEDEN

SINCE we had just returned from a long sojourn in the South Seas, my partner was no less anxious than I to drop in at the Newsreel Club and renew old acquaintances. From the windows of the dining room, with all of New York's modern wonders spread out far beneath us, those primitive islands below the equator seemed awfully remote. Over a savory meal I listened to Eric Maynard, the third member at the table, tell a little anecdote of the Orient.

Though a member of our staff for a number of years, we had never got very close to Maynard. His cold, calculating exterior would fool the average observer. His work though, so cunningly touched with drama and romance, reveals the highly developed sense for news and art which the man possesses.

"What was the biggest kick you got out of your long stay out East, Eric?" I asked, as we lighted our cigars.

"A visit to the Land of the Living Buddhas," was his cryptic reply.

"Sounds good," remarked my partner. "Here's a quiet corner where we can drink our coffee. Out with it Eric!"

Maynard is such an excellent raconteur that, after a preliminary sip, our cups were untouched.

"It was my particular job last winter," began Eric, "to cover the activities of the Manchurian war lords. The so called Chinese War is good for at least one picture a year. Although never very exciting, the office considers it necessary to keep a crew around in the event of a real battle. Most of the time we spent up in Harbin where Bill Kearny—he's my soundman—myself, and a couple of war correspondents used to play stud. Four months of this gets pretty boring; so when we received a cable from the New York office to go down to Shanghai we were no end tickled. The cable instructed us to make our headquarters at the Astor House where we were to meet a Dr. Ingraham who would arrive on the *Empress of Asia* with sealed orders.

"Ingraham turned out to be a professor of anthropology, and he sure had passed on a great lead to the office while he happened to be in town during a leave of absence. To get what we wanted, a long dangerous journey was necessary but the results would well warrant the risk.

"Our objective was a little village on the edge of the Gobi Desert. In the morning, Ingraham introduced us to a native guide and aided us in the selection of supplies for a caravan. Traveling as far as Peiping with us, Ingraham left to resume his work at the museum and we turned inland.

"Six days from Peiping, still traveling

westward, we came upon a wandering band of Mongolians. At first rather hostile, they soon became friendly and invited us to spend the night in one of their *yurts* or felt tents. With their aid we further augmented our wardrobe; clothing ourselves in sheep fleece jackets, goatskin shoes and a sort of burlap parka. The horses carrying our equipment were exchanged for yaks. Bidding us farewell, the natives continued on their way, presenting a ludicrous sight as they jogged off on their sturdy little Mongol ponies.

"Over untamed rivers and up mountainsides we pushed. Westward—always westward. Finally, on the twelfth day we viewed our goal. Stretched out far below us on the edge of the Tao River was the tiny village of Bargi, one of the most outflung *lamaseries*—temple sites—of Tibet. Here, if possible, we intended to photograph the famous *Chamngyon-wa* or Devil Dance. It was on the eve of the annual Butter Festival. The natives, if they knew, would have none of it; but their prince, Yang Cho Ling, a friend of Ingraham's, had given his consent.

"Nowhere on earth is the white man so despised or hated. The Tibetan considers himself supreme.

"Sending our guide ahead, we watched for the signal that would tell us one of the prince's men waited to pass us through the forbidden city's gate. It came, a flash from a crude heliograph we had fashioned out of a shaving mirror; and slowly we approached the town. On entering the enclosure we were guided to the *yamen* or official residence. The prince greeted us cordially and warned us to be discreet, as the priests were wary of all heretics. 'On the morrow,' he said, 'the rites will begin.'

"All through the night I stayed awake. The tension was terrific. Everything was still—not a sound. Suddenly at daybreak a great gong was struck. The single note, lasting an interminable time, was permitted to die out.

"After an impressive silence, the great gong was pounded rapidly. The hoarse roar of huge trumpets joined the tumult. Cymbals crashed. Out of the chaotic discord of noise came the measured chanting of the priests. The strong bass vocal chorus was punctuated by the booming of great drums. The hosts of Kublai Khan, in my mind's eye, passed before me. Somebody shook my shoulder. It was my partner.

" 'Plenty of sound on this, Eric.' He grinned. 'Let's stir.'

"We crossed the square upon which the chanting hall was situated. The great red lacquered columns that held up the roof of the temple reflected the first rays of the morning sun. Elaborate tapestries, centuries old, hung from the long balcony stretched across the front of the building. Upon its railing, at intervals, gleaming brass idols stood guard.

"Our escort led us into a small pagoda-like hut. Breakfast was served there; it consisted of mare's milk, tea and butter. It wouldn't have appealed to a fastidious person at all. One's fingers were the only utensils. And the rancid, fetid atmosphere of the tiny, overcrowded place didn't help matters any. We ate in silence, expediting our exit from the foul place with the excuse to our host that we had to devote considerable time to setting up our outfit. We retraced our way to the temple courtyard. The camera and recording apparatus were set up behind a temple pillar. We were ready . . .

"As the sun approached its zenith, a long line of priests filed out of the building. Separating alternately, they marched down the temple steps and arranged themselves around the open square. Some chanted as they marched, while others blew huge trumpets twelve feet in length. These were supported on the shoulders of the leaders. What a racket! Bells—drums—cymbals. The unusual garb of the monks made me wish for a color camera. They wore long, vivid scarlet robes, and upon their shaven heads were perched helmets, sur-

mounted by a bright yellow ruff, not unlike those worn by Roman gladiators.

"The *Chamngyon-wa* was about to begin. The leader of the dance appeared on the terrace of the temple. He was clothed in a gorgeously brocaded cape; over his face he wore a hideous mask in blue and red; he struck a satyric pose as he held aloft a scepter capped with a silver skull. Slowly the orchestra started the rhythmic cacaphony of the ritual.

"Indescribable, but the old outfit was recording it.

"The chief dancer, impersonating Yama (King of Hell), started his weird gyrations. Down the broad steps he came, his mincing walk keeping time with the music. Reaching the bottom step, he sprang into the air and began whirling around. Faster and faster he spun, occasionally coming to a full halt and striking a grotesque pose that would make any contortionist envious. At this point, three masked attendants, holding skull cups and brandishing swords, leaped into the area.

"Everything was going fine. Lots of action and sound. My partner winked an O. K.

"The noise now increased to an ear-splitting degree, and in filed a score more of the devil dancers. They wore fearful costumes that portrayed skeletons and the various demons associated with the *lama* cult—Balden Lhamo (wife of the devil) and the blue demon Makahala being the most important. This entire group of performers, known as the *Bowa,* went into an interpretative dance depicting the wicked practises of those opposed to Lamaism. The ceremony lasted for hours, and wound up with the reenacted slaying of King Langdarma who long ago persecuted the Buddhists in an effort to destroy their faith.

"By this time the Tibetan audience had worked itself into a frenzy. They tried to join the dancers, but the priests drove them back, lashing at them with long bamboo whips.

"One particularly zealous fanatic slipped through the guard of the monks. He scrambled up the stairs toward our position; coming on us suddenly, he halted. His baleful eyes studied me suspiciously. With a leap he covered the distance between us, and in one gesture ripped the fleece jacket off my shoulder. My white skin confirmed his suspicions and with a bloodcurdling shriek he dragged me out in sight of the impassioned horde. Things were getting hot! A monk, one of the few who knew of our presence, gave the fellow a shove, and sent him tumbling down the steps.

"Behind the backs of the chanting *lamas* we hurriedly packed our stuff. That was a bad half hour. Never did two men pray more devoutly for nightfall. We could hear the mob howling and screaming maledictions. Only the threats of the monks kept them from storming the steps. At last darkness settled down, and piece by piece we smuggled the outfit to one side of the building and loaded the yaks. How we ever reached the city gates I'll never know; but it was accomplished in safety. A trusted servant of the prince passed us out and bade us luck.

"As the hardy little beasts clambered up the loamy mountainsides with their precious burden, I looked back toward the town. Huge bonfires cast their glow skyward; overhead the stars glittered coldly; and through the bitter, rarefied atmosphere we could hear the din of crashing horns, cymbals, and wailing reed instruments. Bill Kearny gripped my hand silently. We both realized what a narrow escape we'd had."

"That must have made a swell picture, Eric," enthusiastically remarked my partner as Maynard finished.

"I thought so," quietly observed Eric. "But the editors said a close-up of that mad mob clambering up the temple steps toward us, if we'd kept the camera going, would have made a swell finishing shot."

"Whose finish?" I grinned as we lighted fresh cigars.

Concluding

A Hashknife and Sleepy Story

By

W. C. TUTTLE

HASHKNIFE HARTLEY and Sleepy Stevens, wandering cowboys with a taste for mysteries, were making a belated supper in the Medina depot when a hatless, much disheveled man rushed in from the driving rainstorm and excitedly called for a telegraph blank. But before he could put pencil to paper, a charge of buckshot fired through a window dropped him lifeless. Both Hashknife and Sleepy recognized the man as Claud Raney, formerly an operative for the Cattlemen's Association.

The next morning when Cochise Conlon, the sheriff, and his deputy, Rusty Roberts, arrived from Concha City, Hashknife struck up a friendship with the deputy, and decided to return to Concha City with him. On the way Roberts told him that the dead man's name was Harris, and that he had worked until a short time before for Dan Parrish, owner of the Nine Drag ranch. Hashknife did not tell the deputy that he and Sleepy had known the murdered man—under another name.

"Don't reckon Harris had many friends around Concha City," Hashknife remarked indifferently.

"Just one," said Roberts. "Fred Austin—" And the deputy went on to tell the two cowboys about the strange disappearance of Austin, who had held up and robbed his own mother of fifteen thousand dollars. "The old lady had to sell the ranch, after that," explained Roberts. "Doc Pollard, the gambler, bought it."

In Concha City Hashknife and Sleepy went to the hotel. In their room Hashknife accidentally tore a ten-dollar bill in two and, trying to glue it back together, discovered that it was counterfeit. He immediately went to the bank and talked to John Cooper, the president, and his cashier, Horace Bond, both of whom said it was the first experience they had ever had with bad money, and neither had any idea whence it had come.

The MAKE-BELIEVE MAN

The next day Hashknife got into a poker game in Doc Pollard's Silver Concha saloon and gambling house. He was lucky and won steadily—until Jack Elk, Dan Parrish's Nine Drag foreman, tried to cold deck him. Hashknife called his hand and Elk went for his gun—to be knocked senseless by Hartley before he could fire.

That evening the sheriff called Hashknife into his office and warned him that the town was filling up with Nine Drag punchers, among them Ed Torrance and Abe Frazee, both of whom were known to be gunmen. While they were talking there came the report of a heavy gun from the direction of the hotel. Hashknife led the way at a run for the hotel.

Reaching their room, Sleepy went in —to stumble and fall over some object on the floor. Hashknife struck a match. Between Sleepy and himself, face on the floor, was a dead man, a big Colt lying a few feet from his right hand . . .

IT WAS Abe Frazee, the cowboy from the Nine Drag.

Hashknife stepped over and looked at the window, which opened to the rear of the hotel. Two panes were splintered, and the sash was scored in many places He stepped back and looked down at the dead man, a curious expression in his gray eyes.

"Go down an' get the sheriff, Sleepy," he said softly. "It looks as though another poor cowboy has gone wrong."

It was only a few minutes before the sheriff, deputy and every man who had been in the Silver Concha crowded into the hallway and room. Torrance was there, more than half drunk. He knew nothing, except that Frazee had left him. Parrish had nothing to say, and he looked upon his dead cowboy indifferently.

"Somebody was on that shed down there, an' he ventilated Frazee with a load of buckshot," said the sheriff.

"Apparently," said Parrish dryly. "But who was it?"

"Who had it in for Frazee?" asked one of the men. "Find somebody who hated Abe, an' you'll have the right man."

"What the hell was Frazee doin' up here?" demanded the sheriff.

Hashknife was watching Parrish, and their eyes met. It was Parrish who looked away.

"Poor ol' Abe, he's dead," wailed Torrance. "Bes' feller y' ever sheen, too, ol' Abe wash."

"Get to hell out of here!" snapped Parrish. "Go get your bronc an' go home, you drunken fool."

"Thash all right, Dan," said Torrance thickly. "Sure, I'll go. But as I shed biffore, ol' Abe wash—"

"Are you goin'?" asked Parrish harshly.

"Y'betcha—" and Torrance went.

The coroner arrived and made his investigation, after which they took the body down to his office. Hashknife and Sleepy helped the old hotel proprietor clean up the floor, and then occupied another room for the night.

With the shade pulled down and the door locked, Hashknife sat down on the bed and tried to reason things out.

"This thing's kinda got you stuck, ain't it?" asked Sleepy.

"Parts of it. Do you realize that somebody thought Frazee was one of us? There was a burned match close to his head, an' it had scorched the carpet a little. I reckon he scratched a match, after he was in the room. It looks as though he was standin' close to the window when he lit it, an' the load of buckshot got him right then. The match didn't go out for a few moments, an' it burned the carpet.

"The gun indicates that Frazee was ready to shoot, an' I think he had lighted the match, not to light the lamp, but to kinda locate himself in the room. But some son-of-a-buck, squattin' out there on that buggy shed, rubbed him out with a shotgun."

"Do you suppose Frazee was here to take a shot at me an' you?" asked Sleepy. "Hell, we ain't never had no trouble with him. Why, we ain't never even spoken to him, Hashknife."

"I know it. Lemme see. Elk wasn't in tonight. Mebbe Elk was out there with the shotgun. If he was, what in hell was Frazee doin'? No, it don't figure out. You don't remember ever seein' Frazee before, do you?"

"I never seen that ugly mug before," declared Sleepy.

It rather stumped Hashknife. He had had trouble with Pollard and Elk, and he wondered if it could be possible that Pollard had hired Frazee to kill him, and Frazee ran foul of Jack Elk, who had a similar idea. It seemed the only solution.

Some one knocked on the door, and Sleepy asked who it was.

"Doc Pollard," replied the man in the hall. "May I have a word with you, Hartley?"

Hashknife shifted his gun and nodded to Sleepy, who cautiously unlocked the door. It was Pollard, alone. He stepped into the room, and Sleepy closed the door. For several moments Pollard and Hashknife eyed each other.

"You're doin' the talkin', Pollard," reminded Hashknife.

"A sucker trick, tryin' to prove an alibi," replied Pollard coldly, and sat down on the edge of the bed. "But I wanted to tell you that I had nothin' to do with what happened tonight."

"Nobody accused you—yet," said Hashknife. "It seems to me you're takin' a hell of a lot for granted, Pollard."

"Why wouldn't I? You'd naturally suppose that I had a hand in it. But I want you to know that when I've got any killin' to be done, I'll do it myself."

"It sounds all right, Pollard."

"I may be a gambler, and when the occasion arises, I may not play a game that's strictly ethical; but I never hire another man's gun to shoot an enemy."

"Meanin' that we are enemies?"

"We're both old enough to talk straight, Hartley. You horned in on my game the other day. Right or wrong, it's all in the point of view. I was sore; and I'm still sore. But, as I said before,

I'll do my own shooting."

"I believe you're tellin' the truth, Pollard," replied Hashknife.

"If I ever told the truth in my life, I am now."

"All right. Rubbin' your name off the list—what's left? I had some trouble with Jack Elk. If Elk accidently killed Frazee, thinkin' it was me or Sleepy, what was Frazee doin' in our room, with a six-gun in his hand?"

"I have no more idea than you have."

"The feller they called Ed Harris was killed with a shotgun."

"Wasn't his name Harris?"

"His name was Raney, an' he was an Association Detective, Pollard."

Pollard shrugged his shoulders and got to his feet.

"I don't know anything about that, Hartley. I didn't come up here to try and alibi myself because I'm afraid of you. I can always take care of myself. But if you're going to try and discover why somebody tried to kill you, you might save a lot of time by eliminating me right now."

Hashknife smiled slowly.

"Would you like to see me find out, Pollard?"

The Silver Concha gambler squinted down at the tips of his patent leather shoes for several moments, his brow furrowed in thought. When he lifted his head he looked Hashknife square in the eyes.

"Yes," he said. "I'm kinda curious myself."

After he went out Hashknife and Sleepy looked perplexedly at each other.

"Do you think he's on the square?" asked Sleepy.

"If he ain't, he's the best actor an' the biggest liar I've met," replied Hashknife.

"All right." Sleepy grinned. "And now suppose you tell me what kinda trouble you had with Doc Pollard."

Hashknife told him what happened at the Austin ranch.

"An' you never tol' me nothin'," complained Sleepy. "Savin' the fair maiden, an' all that. Aw, hell! When there's a chance to be a hero, I'm allus playin' pool."

CHAPTER V

HASHKNIFE LOOKS OVER THE NINE DRAG

IT WAS rather early the following morning, when the sheriff came to the hotel and found Hashknife and Sleepy eating breakfast. He sat down with them and ordered a cup of coffee.

"Figured anythin' out?" he asked.

"Nothin' much to figure on, Conlon," replied Hashknife.

"Does look kinda blind. Suppose me an' you ride out an' have a little *hablar* with Torrance. Him an' Frazee was bunkies, an' it don't look to me as though Torrance wouldn't know somethin' about where Frazee went last night an' why he was killed in your room. Torrance wasn't too drunk to have plenty *sabe* left."

"I'd like to go out there." Hashknife nodded. "I'm kinda curious to know if Jack Elk is still there."

"Well, he ain't; I can tell you that much. I mentioned him to Parrish last night, after the shootin', an' he said Elk drew his pay an' pulled out for Medina yesterday mornin'."

After breakfast they rode out to the Nine Drag. Hashknife wanted to know something about the outfit, and the sheriff told him that Parrish had bought out the ranch from Elwell and Bryant, who now owned the Silver Pheasant mine, at Summit.

"It was a very old spread," explained the sheriff, "an' Parrish put in all new buildings an' corrals. The old buildin's are still down in the mouth of the cañon, mostly fallin' down now. Parrish said he wanted more of a view, so he built up on the mesa."

They rode past the old ranch and up the mesa to the new group. It was all rough construction, and looked more like a huddle of buildings put up for a construction camp than a permanent ranch layout.

The old cook was out at the woodpile,

and he eyed the sheriff closely. He was past sixty, grizzled, hard faced. He had a large nose which had been broken and set crookedly.

"Hyah, Broken Nose," greeted the sheriff.

"Same to you," grunted the cook, shifting his gaze to Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Meet Hartley an' Stevens, Adams," said the sheriff. "Boys, this here is Broken Nose Adams, the best cook that ever served time."

"Anyhow, I was a model prisoner." The cook grinned. "They give me ten years, but they let me out a week ahead of my time. What do you want, Conlon?"

"Where's Parrish?"

"Oh, he's around here some'ers. There he comes now."

Parrish was coming up from the stable, and they turned to meet him.

"What's new?" asked Parrish.

"Nothin' much," replied the sheriff. "Where's Torrance?"

"Torrance?" Parrish shoved back his hat and wiped his brow with a sleeve. "He's gone. I fired him last night, an' he headed for Summit this mornin'. I have the damndest luck with help around here."

"Elk left too, eh?" said Hashknife.

"Yesterday. He went to Medina. Anyway, he said he was goin'."

"Didn't stop in Concha City, I don't guess." The sheriff smiled.

"Prob'ly went around. That hand of poker finished him for me."

"You couldn't afford to keep him," said the sheriff.

"Not a chance."

Parrish turned to Hashknife.

"What's your ideas on that shootin' last night, Hartley?"

"I haven't any. I can't imagine what Frazee was doin' in our room. I never seen him before."

"It sure puzzles me," admitted the owner of the Nine Drag. "I tried to hammer some information out of Torrance, but he either didn't know, or wouldn't tell. He got sore an' shot off his face, so I canned him."

Parrish did not invite them to come in; so, after a few more minutes of conversation, they rode away.

"Is that an old mine tunnel above the house?" asked Hashknife.

"Yeah. This country has been gophered plenty, but nobody ever hit a vein worth anythin'. The Nine Drag done a bit of minin', when Elwell an' Bryant owned it, but they never had any luck until they bought out a prospect at Summit. It turned out to be a good proposition; in fact, it's the biggest mine at Summit, an' it shore paid Elwell and Bryant mighty well."

"Where did Parrish come from?" asked Hashknife.

"I think he came from Idaho; but I'm not certain."

They got back to Concha City, and the hotel keeper handed Hashknife an envelop.

"Somebody left it here on the desk," he said.

It was a note from Nell Austin, and read:

> Dear Mr. Hartley:
> Would it be inconvenient for you to ride out to see us this evening? Please do so, if you have the time.
>
> —MRS. FRED AUSTIN.

"What is she—a billy dux?" asked Sleepy, and Hashknife gave him the letter.

"Sic 'em, cowboy!" snorted Sleepy. "Some folks have all the luck."

Hashknife laughed and put the note in his pocket.

"Do you know anythin' about psychology, Sleepy?" he asked.

"Nope—I couldn't even spell it. But what has psychology got to do with pretty women?"

"Nothin' much." Hashknife smiled and rolled a smoke.

As they walked out, they met Horace Bond, the cashier of the bank, in the doorway.

"Have you discovered any more bad money?" he asked, smiling.

"No, but I'm suspicious of every bill

I see," replied Hashknife. "Do you live here in the hotel?"

"Oh, yes; I've lived here nearly a year. Not a place to brag about, but there are few places in Concha City for a bachelor to live. That is always the drawback in a small town."

"Yeah, that's right. You ought to get married."

"I suppose that would simplify things," replied Bond, as he went on into the hotel.

Hashknife and Sleepy took their horses down to the livery stable.

"Put up your horse an' stick around here for awhile, Sleepy," said Hashknife. "I'm goin' out the back door and take a ride."

Sleepy did not question him. He led his horse out the back door, mounted and rode away behind the town, swinging back to the road which led to the Austin ranch. Sleepy put up his own horse, went into the back room of the stable, where he sprawled out on the stable keeper's cot, picked up an old magazine, made himself comfortable.

Hashknife lost no time in riding to the Austin place, where he found the two ladies. They seemed glad to see him, but said nothing about any note.

"Were you in town today?" he asked.

"Yes, we were," replied the old lady. "We have only been back an hour."

"But we didn't see you in town," said Nell. "I was even bold enough to ask the hotel keeper if you were in. Mother was scandalized."

"No, I wasn't," denied the old lady. "After all the nice things Nell said about you, I wanted to talk with you myself."

"Thank you kindly," said Hashknife. "I suppose that's why you left the note."

"What note was that?" asked Nell. "We left no note."

Hashknife showed her the note, and her eyes opened wide.

"Why, I never wrote that!" she exclaimed. "But it does look like my writing."

"It didn't fool me very badly," admitted Hashknife.

"Why didn't it fool you?"

"Would you have written me a note like that?"

"Why, I—I don't know. If I wanted to ask you our here, I might."

Hashknife shook his head slowly.

"Nope. You called me Mr. Hartley, an' you signed your name Mrs. Fred Austin. You'd have called me Hashknife, an' signed Nell."

"Why, of course I would!"

"There you are. That's why I didn't swallow the bait an' wait for tonight. Somebody was figurin' on makin' an angel out of me, if I came out here in the dark."

"My land of goodness!" exclaimed the old lady. "You don't mean it!"

"I reckon that's about the only reason they could have in decoyin' me out here."

"We heard that Abe Frazee was killed in your room last night," said Nell. "Did you find out what it was all about?"

"No, I didn't."

"But what are you going to do about this note, Hashknife?"

"There ain't much I can do, except to not come out here."

"Well, my land of goodness!" said the old lady. "What is wrong with this country, anyway? I've lived here for years, but I never knew such goings on before."

"The country is all right," said Hashknife. "Now, don'tcha worry about this here note. Some well meanin' murderer is goin' to git all stiff an' sore, settin' out there in the dark, waitin' for me."

He promised to come out or send word the following day, and rode back to town, circling in and entering the rear of the livery stable. As far as Concha City knew, he had never been out to the Austin ranch.

THE stage left for Summit at four o'clock in the afternoon, and Hashknife saw it stop at the bank for several minutes. Sleepy and Rusty were in the office, and Hashknife questioned Rusty about the payroll of the mines.

"You seen the stage stop at the bank,

didn't you?" replied Rusty meaningly.

"There wasn't any guard," said Hashknife.

"Aw, they never use one. We've never had a holdup on that road."

"Ain't you? I saw a tree that was mighty old before lightnin' hit it—but that bolt shore done a complete job."

Rusty laughed, but changed the subject. He knew old Tex Hopping, the stage driver, did not have that payroll. The stop at the bank was a monthly formality, and the package given old Tex was a bundle of papers. Too many people knew about that payroll.

In the twenty miles from Concha City to Summit, the road climbed over three thousand feet, which necessitated slow progress for the stage. About an hour out of Concha City, while grinding up a steep pitch in the road, two masked men, carrying rifles, stepped out into the road and drew down on old Tex, who promptly put on the brake, took the lines between his knees and reached skyward.

It was Tex's first holdup; the first one on the road to Summit, but Tex wasn't frightened. Neither was he a fool. He was ordered off the stage, and guarded by one man, while the other searched the stage. The strongbox yielded nothing, and the bandit came back to talk in whispers to his companion.

They finally ordered Tex back on the stage, got on with him, and forced him to drive on to the top of a mesa, where they took the stage off the road and out of sight. Then they proceeded to tie up old Tex. As an added precaution, they gagged him effectively and left him there.

It was just after supper time when Cochise Conlon left Concha City, driving a pair of cream colored horses hitched to an old buckboard. Few, if any, saw him leave Concha City, because he drove away from behind the bank, and did not strike the road to Summit until well away from the town.

It was bright moonlight, and the team was fresh, the load light. The sheriff had no visions of a holdup, and he nearly fell off the seat when the team shied violently at the two masked men who had stepped out from the shadows. The sheriff had an idea of trying to send the team past them, but in the moonlight he saw that several large boulders had been rolled into the road. So he drew up and elevated his hands.

One of the men kept him covered, while the other came in and examined the stuff in the buckboard. It was nothing but a couple of halters, a coil of rope and a feed of oats for the horses. The man cursed softly at not finding what he wanted, and then ordered the sheriff to get out. He took the sheriff's gun and, while the other bandit herded the officer over to where old Tex was lying, he drove the team to a point beyond the stage.

Coming back in a few moments, the two of them proceeded to tie the sheriff as effectively as they had old Tex. They did not gag the sheriff, but one of them told him to keep his lips sewed up, or they'd come back and sew 'em for him. Lying as he was, he was unable to see where they went, but he was reasonably certain that they went back to hold up any one coming from Concha City. Apparently they had decided to steal that payroll if they had to hold up everybody that came along.

And so it was that the sheriff and stage driver spent a long night; and they were still there at noon the next day when Hashknife, Sleepy, Rusty, John Greenfield, the paymaster of the Silver Pheasant mine, and a couple of his men found them.

Failure of the stage and the payroll to reach Summit had caused Greenfield and his two men to head for Concha City. They had failed to see where the two vehicles had been taken off the road; so went all the way to Concha City to get help for the search.

Cochise Conlon was stiff, sore and mad. Old Tex was even sorer than the sheriff, but not so mad. Tex was somewhat of a philosopher.

"I had a hell of a time," he said painfully. "Nose got full o' dust, an' my mouth was full o' rags. I damn near smothered."

The sheriff stumped around stiffly, until circulation was restored, and in the meantime Greenleaf had gone over to the buckboard.

"Well, they didn't get it, Sheriff!" he called triumphantly.

"You're damn well right they didn't," said the sheriff. "I knowed they wouldn't look for it under there."

The payroll was under the buckboard, wrapped in leather, and fastened to the bottom of the flooring in such a way that no one would ever suspect its presence. Greenleaf took a screwdriver and quickly unscrewed the straps which held it. It made a package about eighteen inches long, and not thick enough to be noticeable, unless one stooped and looked beneath the buckboard.

There was little danger of a daylight holdup. Greenleaf and his two men were well armed; so they put the money in the strong box on the stage, and rode guard back to the mines. The sheriff drove his team back, following the three men on horseback.

Cooper was highly elated to know that the money was safe. It was his idea to carry the payroll in that manner, and it was Cooper who packed the money and set the screws through the straps. His ingenuity had been rewarded, even if the holdup had stopped the money for a while.

Hashknife had listened to the stories told by both Tex and the sheriff. As far as he could determine no one had gone north after the sheriff left Concha City. The holdups had probably decided that either the money had gone through ahead of schedule, or they were waiting until daylight to send it along.

THE sheriff decided that the holdup men were from Summit. It was merely a guess on his part, backed by the fact that he did not believe that any of the cattlemen would do such a thing.

"They knew their job," decided Hashknife. "You can't blame 'em for missin' the payroll. When they didn't find it on the stage, they was wise enough to sidetrack the stage an' hold it to keep the driver from talkin' about it. That's why I say they knew their job."

"Well, we fooled 'em plenty," replied the sheriff. "But next time Cooper's got to figure out somethin' new. I'll be hanged if I'm going to lay out all night, tied up like an express package. Doc Pollard ought to pay me a commission for savin' that payroll. He'll get most of it tomorrow night; an' all I'll get is grief. Lotta damn drunken miners, fightin' an' raisin' the devil."

Hashknife had told Sleepy about the decoy letter, and Sleepy had wanted to go out to the Austin ranch, in spite of the letter, and take a chance on bagging a bushwhacker. But Hashknife refused. The bushwhacker would have all the best of it; and Hashknife hated a shotgun, with its handful of death at short range.

Dan Parrish came to town and heard about the attempted robbery.

"We've got to stop that sort of thing," he declared.

"Well, if you've got to, hop to it," said Rusty.

Parrish laughed.

"You know what I mean, Rusty."

He turned to Hashknife.

"Do you an' your pardner want jobs? I'm short two men, an' I shore could use you."

"As a matter of fact, we don't expect to be here long, Parrish," replied Hashknife seriously. "We never do stay long in any one place. Thank you jist the same, but no-o, I don't reckon we'll be lookin' for jobs around here."

"You hadn't ought to, after what you won the other night." Parrish smiled. "You kinda cleaned up, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I made the old poke look kinda fat. But we shore needed it. The pasture was gettin' kinda short."

"Well, if you change your mind, come out and grab a job."

"Thank you; we'll keep it in mind."

Hashknife had promised to let Nell Austin know how things were; so he took Sleepy out there with him. The two women were glad to see them.

"Mr. Parrish was out last evening," said Nell, "and he said we would have to move out by tomorrow."

"Where are you goin'?" asked Hashknife.

"We don't know."

"I reckon we better talk about things," said Hashknife, and much to Sleepy's chagrin, he took Nell away, leaving only the old lady to talk to the chunky cowboy.

Nell and Hashknife sat down on an old bench in the shade.

"Where did you marry Fred Austin?" asked Hashknife.

"Why, in San Francisco."

"Must be lotsa pretty women in Frisco town, when a cowboy can step in an' marry the prettiest."

The compliment was very sincere, but Nell laughed.

"As a matter of fact, Fred was not a cowboy when I married him."

"No?"

"He was a cowboy until he was about twenty-one, when he went to Portland, Oregon, and learned his trade—engraving. It required several years for him to become proficient, and he went to work for a big company in San Francisco. But the work was very confining, and about that time Fred's father died, and we came over to help Ma Austin run this ranch. Oh, Fred knows cattle—almost as well as he knows the engraving business."

"So he's an engraver, eh?"

"Oh, yes—a master engraver. But the work is terribly hard on the eyes, and he was confined so closely that his health was not good. We were glad to do this for a change."

"How old is he, Nell?"

"Thirty-five. But he doesn't look it."

"You must have been about fifteen when you married him."

Nell laughed softly.

"I was twenty-four; and that was five years ago. But, Hashknife, I'd give years out of my life if—if Fred could come back. Did you ever love anybody?"

He looked at her queerly, his gray eyes very sober.

"Lotsa women," he said. "Young women, middle aged women, and old, old women. I've loved kids an' dogs an' horses."

"But until the right woman comes along, you won't know love, Hashknife."

"She won't never come along, Nell. No woman could understand me. She wouldn't git on a horse and head for the tall hills. I'm jist sort of a dreamer an' a roamer—no good to set down in a house. Down in Pecos there was a song writin' cowboy who wrote a song about us. I only remember one verse—it went like this:

"Creakin' saddle leather,
When the night is still;
Hashknife an' Sleepy
Headin' for a hill."

"You never stay long in any place?" asked Nell.

"Not more than a few days."

"Why are you staying here, Hashknife?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Nell; somebody asked a question, an' I'm tryin' to find the answer."

"Is that why somebody wants to kill you?"

Hashknife nodded slowly.

"Yeah, I suppose it is."

"Are you going to find the answer?"

"I don't know, Nell. It's a queer question. But you've helped me a lot today."

"I have? Why, I don't know of anything I have done."

"I'm the only one who could realize it." He smiled as he got to his feet. "We better be goin' back to town before it gets dark. But what about you folks movin'? Where are you goin'?"

"I wish I knew," replied Nell miserably. "It isn't so much for me—I could get work. But I can't leave Ma Austin."

"Make-believe you don't have to," said Hashknife seriously. "Keep up a make-believe. You've got until tomorrow."

"The order was very definite, Hashknife. It doesn't leave much room for any make-believe."

"Oh, lotsa things can happen in a day an' a night."

"Well, I'll try to make-believe."

"You know how I feel about it," said Sleepy as they rode back. "I'm supposed to be the lovin' cowboy—an' you leave me to talk with the old lady."

"She's a nice old lady," observed Hashknife seriously.

"You're danged right! I'd shore like to use a currycomb on that son of hers."

"He deserves it," admitted Hashknife.

"Well, what's it all about, anyway?" asked Sleepy. "You don't even let me in on any of this stuff. I don't even know why Frazee tried to kill us, an' I don't know why anybody tried to decoy us out to the Austin ranch."

"Neither do I," replied Hashknife.

"Hell!" snorted Sleepy, voicing his unbelief.

"It shore is," sighed Hashknife. "If I knew, we could head for the tall hills again."

CHAPTER VI

HASHKNIFE AND POLLARD STRIKE A BARGAIN

PAY night filled Concha City with miners. The owners of the mines at Summit had ordered that there be no gambling in Summit, and that order was strictly enforced—as far as open gambling was concerned. And so the play hungry miners came down to Concha City to spend their wages in one hectic night. They crowded into the Silver Concha until there was not room for any one to move around. They yelled their orders, quarreled and fought in that packed space; but no one interfered. Doc Pollard ran one of the roulette games, where the miners carpeted the layout with currency. The smoke made them a blurred mass of humanity, the air rank with the smell of spilled liquor and perspiration. Hashknife saw Dan Parrish there, but he was alone, and not gambling.

The sheriff, alert for any serious trouble, introduced Hashknife to John Elwell, one of the two owners of the Silver Pheasant mine, and former owner of the Nine Drag cattle spread.

"Lookin' after your boys?" asked Hashknife.

Elwell shook his head.

"Not me. But pay night is always interestin'. You'll see all kinds of fights pretty soon. They ain't drunk enough yet."

"The sheriff was tellin' me that you done some minin' out at the Nine Drag," said Hashknife.

"We sunk some money out there," said Elwell. "Dug a thirty-foot shaft and stoped out enough rock to fill Poquito Cañon; but our ore was only a pocket. Every one around here had the minin' bug for a while, I reckon."

"You made more in mines than you did in cattle, didn't you?"

"I should say so—lots more. We never made much in cattle."

"I wonder if Parrish is makin' any money at the Nine Drag."

"I dunno. We had some trouble with Parrish, after we made the sale of the Nine Drag; an' since then we never paid any attention to him or his business."

"Is he supposed to be a good cattleman?"

Elwell laughed shortly.

"All he knows, he learned on the Nine Drag."

Hashknife managed to work his way in near where Pollard was operating the roulette. The gambler nodded coldly, and raked in the bets, which he was doing with great regularity. A miner shoved in beside Hashknife, craning his neck for a glimpse of the layout.

"Damn such a crowd!" he snorted. "I ain't had a chance to make a bet tonight."

"Have you got a couple fives for a ten, pardner?" asked Hashknife.

"Shore have."

They made the exchange, and Hashknife struggled out of the place. Sleepy was watching the crowd at a chuck-luck game. Hashknife went across the street to the hotel, where he drew close to a lamp and examined the two five-dollar bills. After a close inspection, he went back across the street, managed to shove his way back to the roulette game, where he caught Doc Pollard's eye.

The dapper gambler did not want to ask for a relief, but he seemed to realize that Hashknife demanded his attention. In a few minutes an extra dealer took the wheel, and Pollard joined Hashknife, an unspoken question in his eyes.

Hashknife led the way back to Pollard's office, and they shut the door behind them.

"Well?" queried Pollard coldly.

"I'm trustin' you, Pollard," said Hashknife. "I think you're on the square, as far as this deal is concerned."

"That's kind of you. What's the deal? I'm in a hurry."

"Your money is good, ain't it?"

"Good? I don't understand that question, Hartley."

"Made by Uncle Sam."

"I hope it is." The gambler smiled.

"Look at these."

Hashknife handed him the two fives. Pollard glanced sharply at them, but did not understand what was in Hashknife's mind. As far as he was concerned, the money was the same as any other.

"What about them?" he asked.

"They're counterfeit, Pollard."

The gambler examined them closer.

"Why, they look all right."

"They're not. More than that, I'll bet ninety-nine per cent. of the money you've taken in tonight is counterfeit."

The gambler's eyes widened a little as he stared at Hashknife.

"How do you know this?" he asked.

"I'm bettin' it is. The house is winnin' heavily tonight, Pollard, an' the stuff ain't worth a plugged dime—unless you can manage to git rid of it."

"Hell, I can't believe that. Why, the bank here furnishes the payroll for the mines. Cooper is as square as any man on earth. The mine owners wouldn't do a thing like that. Hartley, you must be wrong."

"I'm bettin' I'm right. Go out an' bring back some of that money. Some of it may be legal, because you had to have money to start."

"Wait here."

Pollard was not gone more than two or three minutes, when he came back with three new bills; a ten, twenty and a fifty.

"These are from the payroll," he said. "Now, show me where they're bad."

It only required a few moments to convince Pollard that the money was bad. He sat down on the edge of his desk, staring at the bills.

"What on earth can I do?" he asked helplessly.

"Close your games. You don't want that money."

"And start a riot? If these men find out that they've been paid in bad money, they'll wreck something."

"You never paid it to them. Jist quietly close the games. But give me fifteen minutes before you close 'em, Pollard."

"What's the idea, Hartley?"

"Oh, jist a little pet theory of mine. Will you do it?"

"I guess you're dealing this game. Go ahead."

HASHKNIFE left the office and worked his way down through the crowd. Sleepy and Rusty were on a couple of chairs in a corner, eagerly watching a drunken fight near the bar. Hashknife worked his way over to Sleepy, who leaned down to hear what Hashknife had to say. Swiftly the tall cowboy gave him orders. Sleepy did not ask questions; he just nodded and smiled. It promised action.

Hashknife walked quickly down to

the livery stable, where he saddled his own horse. He was cautious now. After saddling, he walked to the front and inspected the street. It was narrow, badly lighted. From any of those dark alleys a man with a shotgun and a buckshot load could kill a rider in the middle of the street.

Hashknife mounted his horse and rode out the rear door. He must circle the stable corral in order to go north. It was a bulky old corral, built of two-by-twelve planks, and as Hashknife swung his horse around the corner, a pencil of flame leaped at him from against the boards, and the gun seemed to crash almost in his face. He felt the sear of the bullet; but almost as quick as the flash he was down on the opposite side of his frightened horse, shooting back at the dim shape in the corner.

When his gun was empty, he was a hundred yards away, the horse running. Only the one shot had been fired at him. He checked his horse and quickly filled his gun, wondering where he had been hit. An investigation proved that the bullet had ripped between his left arm and his side, near the armpit, burning him only slightly.

There was no use going back. By this time the assailant was well away from his former ambush. Hashknife did not believe he had hit the man. Shooting at a shadow from a running horse does not make for good marksmanship. So Hashknife holstered his gun and sent the horse galloping up the road.

The sound of the shots apparently did not attract any attention. If any one heard them they decided that some one was merely celebrating paynight in Concha City. The good people of the town usually stayed close to home on that night.

After Hashknife had been gone about ten minutes, Sleepy spoke to Rusty, and they went down to the stable, where they saddled their horses, and led them over to the sheriff's hitch-rack. They hurried back to the Silver Concha, where Doc Pollard seemed to be the center of attraction. The miners were grumbling, but the gambler was firm.

"No, boys; the games are closed for tonight," he said. "All the drinks you want—but no more gambling."

"Who the hell busted the bank?" demanded a big miner. "I know I didn't."

There came a hearty chorus of protests that none of them had won any real money. They wanted action. John Elwell shoved his way to Pollard and asked him what was the trouble. They stood there in the yellow light, smoke eddying around their faces, the massed miners surrounding them.

"You've got to explain your reasons, Doc," said Elwell.

Pollard looked around the sea of faces, and his glance came back to Elwell.

"If you've got to know, Elwell," he said distinctly. "Your men were paid off in counterfeit money."

"Doc, that ain't true. Don't say a damn fool thing like that."

"Go get Cooper," said Pollard. "Bring him here to prove whether it is good or not. Everybody go over and have a free drink."

Sleepy, watching the crowd closely, nudged Rusty, and they slipped out together. They headed for the hitch-rack, not seeing the man who came staggering up the sidewalk, weaving drunkenly in the dark. He reached the door of the saloon, groping blindly. Some one gave him a hand, and he came in. The room was an uproar of conversation, but it stilled quickly when a man yelled:

"He ain't drunk—he's been shot! Look at the blood on him!"

It was Torrance, the former Nine Drag cowboy, who was supposed to have gone to Summit. He had lost his hat; his hair matted down on his forehead, his skin was pasty, his eyes wild. He did not seem to see the crowd. The sheriff elbowed his way in and grasped him by the arm.

"What happened to you?" asked the sheriff.

"Happened?" whispered Torrance foolishly. "He—he got me, damn him. Dan,

where are you? C'mere, Dan. I—I—"

Torrance collapsed so quickly that the sheriff failed to save him from the fall.

"He wanted Parrish," said the sheriff. "Is Parrish in here?"

"He went out a minute or two ago," replied some one. "I seen him leave."

"Somebody shore smoked up that waddy," remarked a miner. "He don't look t' me as though a doctor would help him a hell of a lot. Well, that's the way it goes in the West, boys."

"Some of you help me take him over to my office," ordered the sheriff. "One of you go an' git the doctor, even if he don't need one. An' somebody see if you can find Parrish."

The livery stable keeper came in, rather excited, when he learned what had happened.

"I'll betcha I know somethin'," he said. "I was takin' a nap in the tack-room a while ago. I hears a noise, an' I seen Hartley ride out the back door. Pretty quick I hears a bunch of shots go off, jist like a handful of firecrackers. I took a look, but I can't see nobody. I'll betcha that was when this feller got drilled."

"You mean that Hartley shot Torrance?" asked Pollard.

"I ain't said he did; I said he rode out jist a minute before the shots went off."

They took Torrance down to the sheriff's office, and a few minutes later Cooper, the banker, came over to the Silver Concha. He had been told of the bad money, and his face was very grave. Pollard gave him a handful of bills, and only one of them was legal. The disgruntled miners were inclined to be threatening in their remarks, but John Elwell stepped quickly into the breach.

"None of that, men," he said. "You can't lose. The money will all be made good, even if it breaks the Silver Pheasant. We don't do business that way. There has been a terrible mistake made; so be calm an' let us work it out."

"That's the stuff, John," yelled a miner. "We trail with you."

"Thank you—you won't lose by it."

The sheriff joined Elwell and Cooper, and the three of them went to Pollard's private office, where they tried to figure out what had happened. It was a baffling thing. Cooper had fixed up that money himself. He admitted that it was in new bills. The payroll was always sent in new currency. He hadn't examined them.

Pollard told them how he happened to know the money was bad.

"That's the same cowboy who brought in a bad bill to me," said Cooper. "I bought it from him for face value. I wanted a sample of counterfeit, and I'd say it is a good one."

"Where's Hartley?" asked the sheriff. "I can't find Hartley, Stevens nor Rusty."

"I don't know," replied Pollard. "Hartley made me promise to give him fifteen minutes before I closed the games. Why, I don't know."

"Who is this Hartley?" asked Cooper.

The men looked at each other, and all shook their heads.

"He's nobody's damn fool," said Pollard.

"You said quite a lot," nodded the sheriff. "I reckon our best bet is to take it easy until he shows up."

"Do you think he knows somethin'?" asked Cooper anxiously.

"He better," said the sheriff dryly. "We don't, that's a cinch."

CHAPTER VII

FRED AUSTIN

HASHKNIFE rode swiftly out to the Nine Drag that night. There was no moon, but the starlight was sufficient to show him the road. He was simply working on a hunch—a make-believe. He realized that there was a clever brain behind all this bad money; clever enough to destroy all evidence, if given a chance.

He rode in close to the Nine Drag corrals and slipped off his horse. The ranch-house was only a dark bulk, with

no lights showing, as he went cautiously toward a rear corner. He had never been inside the place, had no idea of the arrangement of the rooms. He had hoped that there would be a light in the place. At least, Broken Nose Adams should be there, he reasoned. He worked his way past the kitchen door and over to a window, which he believed was at one end of the main room. Few windows or doors are ever fastened in the range country, as there is little danger of sneak thieves.

After listening for several moments, Hashknife slid the window up. There was another period of cautious listening, before he slid in across the sill. The room was as black as the proverbial chimney, but after a while he was able to distinguish a window at a far side. He was afraid to light a match; so he felt his way around, moving with all the caution of a hunting cat.

Suddenly he heard a noise; a sort of hollow, scraping noise, rather difficult to describe. It seemed to be directly in front of him. Then came a scraping noise, as though a heavy object were being dragged on the floor. Hashknife felt the hair rise on the nape of his neck as he tensed himself, gun gripped in his right hand.

And then it seemed as though some one or something drew in a sharp breath, and a heavy foot slithered on the rough floor. Almost at the same instant a heavy body collided with him, and Hashknife swung the gun in a short arc.

A man grunted with pain, fell against Hashknife, who sprang aside and ahead, trying to avoid a clinch; and the floor seemed to jerk from under him. He came down with a crash, landing on his elbows and belly, his feet flailing out into space; and then he fell backward, striking against a wall and rebounding to a perpendicular position and coming down with a sickening crash.

He rolled sidewise, his lungs fighting for air. He was dazed and sick from the impact, but not unconscious. As soon as he could get his breath he began an investigation, feeling for broken bones. His body was numbed to some extent, but he seemed able to work his legs; so he managed to stand upright. The walls were rock, and the floor was uneven. He had lost his gun; so he took a chance and lighted a match. The gun was lying at his feet. He picked it up and looked around. The illumination showed a ladder, but the puny flame of the match would not enable him to see the top of the hole into which he had tumbled.

It seemed to be a mine shaft, about six feet in circumference, and to the left of him was the entrance to a tunnel, not more than five feet high by three feet wide. There had been no sound from the man he had struck. The fall had not been exactly beneficial to Hashknife, but his nerve was still intact.

Without questioning the danger, he humped over and started into the little tunnel, feeling his way along. Finally he lighted another match, and the first thing he saw was a small wooden box, leaning against the wall, the cover shoved aside, disclosing a dozen or more miners' candles. He quickly lighted one of these, and a few more steps took him into a stope, which was probably thirty feet across and ten feet or more high. It was like a huge room carved out of solid rock.

Hashknife studied this stope carefully. There was nothing in it. As far as he could see it was merely a deserted mine. By the aid of the handle he worked his way around the sides, and in a broken angle of the stope he found a heavy old door, set in flush with the rock. It was so near the color of the rock that in the pale light of the candle he nearly missed seeing it.

There was a heavy ring for a handle, and the fastening was two pieces of drill steel, which had been set in drill holes at the edge of the door, and which projected over the edge for six inches. In order to open this door, which opened outward, the two pieces of two-foot steel must be drawn out entirely.

Hashknife studied this arrangement for several moments. What was beyond

that bolted door, he wondered. And why was it bolted?

"There's one good way to find out," he said, half aloud, and drew out the two pieces of steel.

He held the gun ready for action, gripped candle and door ring in his left hand, and flung the door open. Nothing happened. The light did not illuminate the way ahead for more than a few feet.

But as he stepped into the tunnel a thrown stone struck his left arm with numbing force, the candle went flying aside, and at the next moment a heavy body hurtled into him, flinging him backward, and the two bodies crashed down together. Unluckily for Hashknife, his head came in contact with a stone and he relaxed for a few moments, nearly knocked out.

But he clung to his gun. It was a full minute before he was able to remember just what had happened. His left arm ached painfully, and a lump was already forming on the back of his head. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he began wondering what had become of his assailant. The darkness was oppressive. Hashknife kept perfectly still and tried to locate the man who had attacked him. Finally he heard him crawling over the rocky floor, but was unable to locate him definitely.

"Headin' for that little tunnel that leads to the shaft," decided the tall cowboy.

A sudden idea entered his aching brain, and he called softly—

"Austin."

There was no response, but the crawling noise had ceased.

"If you are Austin, I'm your friend," said Hashknife. "You don't know me, but I'm not one of the gang."

Still there was no response. Hashknife got to his feet. He was a little dizzy and uncertain yet. He had lost his sense of direction in that opaque darkness.

"Who are you?" asked a voice, which suddenly boomed in that big vault.

"My name is Hartley," replied Hashknife. "Are you Austin?"

"Yes, I'm Austin."

"Got a match so I can locate you, pardner?"

"Light one yourself; I'm not going to make a target out of myself."

Hashknife lighted a match.

"I lost my candle," he said. "Mebbe I can—here she is! That's luck."

HE LIGHTED the candle and started across the cavern, when there came a terrific crash, and the whole world seemed to jerk violently. Hashknife was flung full length on the rocky floor. Rocks sifted down from the sides of the stope, and he heard small sections of the roof crash down on the rocky floor, and smash into bits.

The concussion had driven the wind out of his lungs, and it seemed as though his eardrums had burst; but none of the flying or falling rock had struck him. He managed to sit up, take a deep breath, and the fumes of dynamite nearly strangled him. He dropped flat and held his mouth close to the ground.

"What the hell's goin' to happen next?" he wondered, and began sliding snakewise along the rocky flooring.

He was trusting his sense of direction now. His gun was safely in his holster, and he still had a few matches left. His idea was to reach the wall of the stope and, by crawling along it, to find the little entrance tunnel.

He reached the wall within six feet of the tunnel mouth, and there he found Fred Austin. Hashknife scratched a match and looked at the man. A falling rock had struck him on the head, and he was unconscious; but Hashknife decided he was not seriously injured. Dropping the match, he crawled through the little tunnel. The powder fumes had not penetrated the shaft yet.

He was taking no chances on lighting more matches now. He clawed around, found the ladder and began climbing. His left arm hurt badly, and there was a dull throb in his head; but he gritted his teeth and climbed until

he came up to the floor level, where he slid out on his belly and rolled sidewise.

Hashknife was glad to lie there for awhile. There was no sound. He wondered what became of the man he had knocked down. Perhaps he was still there in the dark. But Hashknife really didn't care. What he wanted was a drink and a chance to lie down on a soft bed. Never in his life had he been so badly shaken.

But this was no time to stretch out and think things over. He got to his hands and knees. At the risk of making a target of himself, he must have a light. Gripping a cocked gun in his right hand, he scratched a match on the floor. As the flame flared up, the familiar voice of Sleepy Stevens drawled—

"Well, where the hell have you been all this time?"

Sleepy was leaning in the window Hashknife had opened. There was a lamp on a small table, and Hashknife lighted it.

"You're a mess, feller," observed Sleepy seriously.

"Rusty with you?" asked Hashknife hoarsely.

"He's leanin' against the front door," replied Sleepy, and then Rusty stepped into the room, gun in hand.

"Man, you shore been havin' a hard Winter!" exclaimed the little deputy. "You shore war painted your face somethin' dreadful."

"Did you fellers see anybody leavin' here?" asked Hashknife.

"We didn't see none, but we heard 'em," replied Rusty. "We was almost here, when we hears a horse gallopin' off through the brush as though somebody was cuttin the hills for town. An' after we got here—what the hell was that—a earthquake? It shore rattled this place a-plenty."

"What about that other feller?" asked Hashknife anxiously.

"Oh, that was jist after the quake. Me an' Sleepy runs around the house, wonderin' what in hell was goin' on, an' we hears a horse goin' down the road, spurnin' the country a-plenty. We didn't know but what it was you; but Sleepy said you said—"

Rusty stopped, staring at the open trap. Fred Austin had appeared, groping blindly for something upon which to take hold. Hashknife stepped over, caught him by the collar and heaved him over the edge, where he sat and blinked at the light.

"Where'd you come from?" gasped Rusty. "Why, it's Fred Austin! Whiskers, mud, blood an' bruises—but it's still Fred Austin!"

Austin looked at him, but without any especial interest. Rusty turned to Hashknife.

"Why, Hashknife, that's Fred Austin."

"I'd kinda figure it was, after what you've been talkin'," said Hashknife dryly. "I never met the gent, except informally, you know."

"How do you mean?" asked Rusty.

"Well, I opened a door an' he socked me with a rock, an' then piled into me like a ton of brick."

"The hell he did! Fred, don't you know me?"

"I was going to sock Broken Nose," said Austin dully. "He went to get me some water, an' I was going to sock him an' get away. I knew the rest were gone tonight. Broken Nose had been drinking."

"That don't make sense, but I suppose he knows what it means," said Rusty.

"Ain't I goin' to git a chance to shoot somebody?" asked Sleepy. "Is all this fuss over nothin'?"

Sleepy's query seemed to jolt Hashknife into action. He turned to Rusty and pointed at Fred Austin.

"Git this feller on his feet if you can, Rusty. If you can't find a extra horse on the place, both of you ride your horse. Me an' Sleepy have got to fan the breeze back to town."

Hashknife flung the door open, and the last he heard from Rusty was—

"My bronc won't ride double!"

"Use your personality on him!" yelled Sleepy. "He'll be all right, if you bring

enough pressure to bear."

Two minutes later the two rambling cowboys were galloping down the road that led to Concha City.

"You got anythin' definite?" asked Sleepy, as they raced along, knee to knee.

"Forty-seven stone bruises an' a couple dislocated lungs," replied Hashknife. "If you held my head an' pulled on my legs, I'd ravel out like a old sock."

CHAPTER VIII

GUN SMOKE

MA AUSTIN and Nell came to town that night, bringing their meager personal belongings, and took a room at the hotel. Nell had a few dollars in the bank; enough to pay their room rent for a week or so. Ma Austin wanted to sell what little furniture they had, which might bring a few dollars. But after that there was no future.

The old hotel keeper welcomed them warmly. He had been retailing Concha City history to Jake Siegelbaum, a clothing salesman from Chicago, who was making his first Arizona trip. Jake was middle aged, bald, portly and self-sufficient. A shiny derby hat clung precariously to his bald pate as he gazed in ox eyed wonder that any Arizona woman could be as pretty as Nell Austin.

"That woman—a cowboy's wife!" he exclaimed, when the old man came back from installing them in a room.

"I was tellin' you about the feller who robbed his own mother; she's *his* wife."

"Honest!" exclaimed Jake. "He should be ashamed."

"Mebbe he is. You see, he never came back to say."

"I can't imagine it."

Things were still running along at the Silver Concha. Between Elwell and Pollard, they had fixed up a credit arrangement, guaranteed by Elwell, which satisfied the miners. But Pollard, Elwell and Cooper were far from satisfied. The bank would be hard hit. In fact, it was doubtful if it could survive such a loss.

Cooper got Horace Bond from his room at the hotel, and they opened the vault. There was not over ten thousand dollars in currency in the vault, none of it exactly new, and as far as they could determine, none of it was counterfeit.

Bond seemed stunned over the catastrophe. He and Cooper went over to the Silver Concha, where they examined some of the bad money. The sheriff joined them, tugging at his mustaches.

"Torrance is dead," he told them. "Never spoke. I can't find Hartley, Stevens nor Rusty. Damn Rusty! Ever' time I need him bad, he's gone."

"Torrance?" queried Bond. "What happened to him, Conlon?"

"Somebody shot him tonight. He come staggerin' in here. The stableman says he thinks Hartley shot him, but he ain't sure. Where the hell has that long legged jigger gone, anyway? He discovers this bad money, an' then disappears."

Doc Pollard stepped over to his small safe and twisted the combination. He took out a bundle of bills, fastened with a wide rubber band, and began looking at them. His hands trembled slightly as he put them back into the safe and locked the door.

"All right, Doc?" asked Cooper.

"All wrong," replied the gambler shortly.

It was the money Dan Parrish had paid him for the Austin ranch.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Bond.

"Might as well let it drift for tonight," suggested Cooper. "Not much use tryin' to figure out anythin', 'cause we're all upset. Go back to bed, Horace."

"If there's anything I can do—" said the cashier.

"Nothin' any of us can do," said the sheriff. "Damn it, if I could only find Hartley."

"What good would that do you?" queried Bond.

"I don't know—I reckon I'm grabbin' at straws."

They went back into the saloon, and

Bond left them to return to his room.

"I saw Ma Austin an' Fred's wife awhile ago," said the sheriff. "Parrish made them move."

"He did, eh?" said Pollard coldly. "Are they at the hotel?"

"Yeah. I dunno what the devil's goin' to become of 'em, Doc. They ain't got no money an' no place to go."

"Have you seen anythin' of Parrish lately?" asked Pollard.

"He was around here earlier in the evenin', Doc."

"If you happen to see him, tell him I want him, will you?"

"I will; but I think he's gone home."

The sheriff went down to his office, but it was vacant; so he went up to the hotel, arriving there just as two horses galloped into town. The riders dismounted at the Silver Concha hitch-rack. He saw them look through a window of the big saloon for several moments, and then they came straight across the street to him. They were Hashknife and Sleepy.

The sheriff started to question Hashknife, but the tall cowboy took him by the arm, and the three of them went down a narrow alley and came around behind the hotel. Humped in the shadows of the old shed were three saddled horses. The three men stopped short. Hashknife whispered swiftly:

"Conlon, you come with me. Sleepy, don't let a damn soul down that rear stairway. I don't care who it is, make 'em stay back. We've got to block anybody from the horses. C'mon, Conlon."

They hurried back to the front.

"Watch them windows up there," said Hashknife, pointing to the upper windows of the hotel. "If anybody tries to get out, shoot 'em on the fly."

"But what the hell is it all about?" demanded the sheriff. "You givin' me orders—to shoot. I'm the sheriff, an' I'll tell you—"

"You watch them windows—an' your own skin."

Hashknife strode into the little lobby, where the old hotelkeeper was still entertaining Jake Siegelbaum. Hashknife stopped just inside the room, eyeing the top of the stairway.

"They've been lookin' for you, Mr. Hartley," said the hotelkeeper quickly. "Mr. Cooper an' Doc Pollard an' the sheriff. Meet Mr. Siegelbaum, who sells clothing, an—"

Siegelbaum got ponderously to his feet, ready with a glad hand, but Hashknife ignored him as he moved cat-like toward the stairs. His right hand flashed down and he drew his gun.

WHAM! A spurt of flame from the shadows at the top of the stairs. The bullet missed Hashknife by three feet, and it tore through the crown of Siegelbaum's derby. The ill fated hat was still in the air when Hashknife fired back at the flash; and the hat was probably still in the air when Mr. Siegelbaum ran from under it, nearly removed a door casing, and fell off the sidewalk into the street.

The hotelkeeper, showing surprising agility for a man of his age, dived wildly for the shelter of his little counter.

Again Hashknife sent a heavy bullet smashing into that shadow at the head of the stairs, and followed it up, running as fast as he could. The narrow hallway was dark. He stopped, crouched.

From behind the hotel came the sound of a shot, and Sleepy's voice yelling—

"Hunt your hole, you coyote!"

There was a doorway, opening to the rear stairs, and even in the dark Hashknife saw a man backing into the hallway from this door. He was the one Sleepy had driven to cover. The man came running down the hallway, and at the same moment Nell Austin, alarmed by the shooting, opened her door, and the man darted in, knocking her aside. Then the door slammed shut.

Hashknife did not know it was Nell Austin; he only knew it was a woman. Swiftly he ran down the hallway, halting just short of the closed door. He heard the man open a window, which

protested squeakingly, and the man's voice:

"Shut up, damn you! Nobody's goin' to hurt you if you behave."

From the street came the crash of a shot, the tinkle of broken glass, a vitriolic bit of profanity, as the man fell back into the room. The walls shook from the concussion of two shots, as the man shot back at the sheriff; and a moment later the door was flung open.

The man came out swiftly, crouched low, and Hashknife's attempt to strike him with the gun barrel failed; but he went into the fellow with a rush, and they went down fighting like a couple of animals. Hashknife was handicapped by a sore left arm, and the grip in his left hand was not what it had been, but he clung to his opponent, slashing at him with the gun barrel.

They crashed into another door, just as it opened, and a man attempted to vault over them; but Hashknife flung up one shoulder, tripped the fellow, who sprawled heavily down the hallway.

The rest of it was rather chaotic to Hashknife. His opponent got loose and fled, stumbling, down the hallway, while the man who had been tripped surged to his knees and began shooting at Hashknife. The hotel shook from the heavy reports, but the shooter, apparently dazed and shaken by his fall, was sending bullets a foot over Hashknife's head.

Hashknife, sprawling flat, fired but once, and the man fell forward, his gun clattering to the uncarpeted floor. Some one was shooting behind the hotel, as Hashknife got to his feet and staggered for the rear stairway.

Sleepy came running in.

"I got him!" he panted. "It was Jack Elk!"

"Good man," said Hashknife hoarsely, and leaned against the wall.

Men were crowding up the stairs, headed by the sheriff. They came cautiously down the hallway, coughing in the powder smoke. Hashknife and Sleepy turned and came toward them.

Suddenly they all halted sharply, when they heard the heavy thud of another shot.

"Git a light—somebody!" snapped the sheriff. "Is that you, Hartley?"

"We're all right," said Sleepy. "I had to down Jack Elk. He's at the foot of the back stairs."

"I—I shot at a man," faltered the sheriff. "He tried to come out through a window. He shot back an' busted a window across in the Silver Concha."

"An' damn near killed me," added a miner.

The hotelkeeper got a lamp. The man on the hallway floor was Dan Parrish. He was not dead, but dangerously wounded. While the men stared at him, Hashknife stepped over and flung open the door of the room from which Parrish had emerged.

The lamp was burning, but the room was fogged with smoke. On the bed sat Broken Nose Adams, nursing a smashed arm, his face hideous with dried blood and dirt. Sprawled on the floor beside the little table, a gun still clutched in his right hand, was Horace Bond, the cashier of the Concha City Bank.

The men crowded in, shocked into silence over what they saw. Broken Nose snarled at them, his face twisted with pain.

"Shot himself," he said hoarsely, nodding toward Bond. "Too damn scared to even shoot it out with you. Damn you, Hartley, you either shoot straight or you're lucky."

"Where's that money?" asked Hashknife.

"What money? Hell, I dunno anythin' about money."

"Don't lie to me. The money you fellers was goin' to split. We'll find it, so you might as well tell us."

"It's under the bed in Bond's valise," growled Adams.

One of the men got down and drew out the valise.

"Hartley, what does this mean?" asked the sheriff. "All this shootin', an' dead men. Why don'tcha say somethin' to—"

They heard a woman scream in the hallway. It was Nell Austin, who was trying to find out what was going on in that room, when she saw Fred Austin and Rusty coming down the corridor.

"It's Fred Austin!" exploded a cowboy at the rear of the crowd.

"My Gawd, what next!" blurted the sheriff. "Hashknife, tell us what this is all about."

Hashknife turned to Broken Nose.

"Fred Austin is out there; do you want to talk with him?"

"Fred Austin? How'd he—" Broken Nose swallowed heavily. "Why, Parrish said he—"

"I know," interrupted Hashknife. "You fellers had that place all mined with dynamite; so that in case anythin' went wrong you could blow everythin' loose an' destroy all evidence—includin' Austin. But he was out ahead of the explosion."

"This is all Greek to me," said the sheriff, but Hashknife paid no attention to him. He knew Broken Nose was badly hurt, and he wanted to get information from him while he was able to talk.

"Who shot Raney—the man you knew as Harris?"

"Where's Parrish an' Jack Elk?" asked Adams.

"They both got it—cold," said Hashknife.

"Parrish killed Harris," said Broken Nose. "Harris escaped, an' he had to be killed."

"Why didn't he come here to Concha City, instead of over to Medina?"

"Because Parrish lied to him about who was in on the deal. He told Harris that the sheriff was in on it. I talked to Harris about it. He was afraid to come here."

"That explains some of the things," said Hashknife, with evident relief. "There was certain points that bothered me."

"I don't see yet," said the sheriff.

John Cooper shoved his way in, and stared down at the body of Horace Bond.

"It was a counterfeitin' gang," said Hashknife. "Parrish an' Bond was the ringleaders."

"And I trusted Bond," said Cooper. "I can't understand how you ever connected him with the outfit, Hartley."

"Smart crooks always make mistakes, Cooper. Bond wanted to kill me away from town; so he wrote a decoy note, supposed to have been left for me by Mrs. Fred Austin. He had her signature, an' was able to fake her writin' pretty danged well."

"Why didn't you git him for that?" asked the sheriff quickly.

"An' spoil all chances of landin' the whole bunch? Did you hear anythin' about that note, Broken Nose?"

"Yeah," said Broken Nose painfully. "Parrish gave Bond hell for that; but they was always quarrelin'. Parrish was a hog for money, an' he didn't care how he got it. He made bad money for a long time, but the Federal officers got on his trail; so he came out here an' turned cowman. He said this was the safest place on earth. Him an' Bond was old friends, an' Bond was as crooked as Parrish."

"What about Fred Austin?" asked Hashknife.

"That's where Parrish made a mistake," replied Broken Nose. "Parrish knowed that Fred was an expert engraver—an' Parrish shore needed one. He worked around with Fred, gradually slippin' him some information, an' tryin' to git Fred to come in with us. I dunno how far he got with Fred. I mean, I dunno how much he told Fred about what he was doin'.

"Anyway, Parrish knew that Harris was a detective, an' that when Fred an' Harris blundered into the Nine Drag ranch-house an' found me an' Parrish comin' up out of the trap, Parrish thought Fred had tipped it off to the detective. We threw down on both of 'em right then. Bond wanted to kill 'em both, but Parrish wasn't exactly a cold blooded murderer. He knowed he could use Fred; so he put 'em both down in the mine.

"Parrish was scared that somebody might wonder where Harris an' Austin had disappeared; so Bond went through the letters an' stuff we took off Harris, an' forged a letter to the Association, imitatin' Harris's writin', in which Harris resigned. When Elk wore Austin's clothes an' robbed Mrs. Austin, it shore made a reason for Austin to have left the country."

"Fred refused to do any engravin', an' Parrish told him he'd either work or git killed. I reckon Fred mebbe had a idea he might escape; so he went to work. Harris didn't do nothin' except scheme how to git away, which he did—an' got killed."

"Who robbed Mrs. Austin—you?" asked Hashknife.

"Me—hell! Jack Elk done that. Parrish took Fred's clothes away, an' Jack swiped 'em, when he knowed Pollard was goin' to buy the ranch from Mrs. Austin. Parrish didn't know it. Elk robbed her, an' I got my share of the money. Jist to make things look bad for Fred an' make a reason for his disappearance, Jack Elk paid Pollard the money Fred owed him; paid it in counterfeit. You can't blame anythin' on Fred Austin. Parrish would have killed him if he didn't work; an' he'd have killed him at the end, anyway. We'd have been all right, if Hartley had stayed away. I—I'm glad Austin got away. Hell, I never killed anybody—I couldn't shoot straight enough."

BROKEN NOSE ADAMS keeled over in a dead faint as the doctor came bustling in. Hashknife stepped out into the hall. There were a dozen miners around the doorway across the hall, probably wondering why an old lady and a beautiful woman were crying over a pasty faced, bearded man, whose rough clothes looked as though they had been underground for a long time.

Rusty and the prosecuting attorney came down the hall.

"Didja hear Fred's side of the story, Hashknife?" asked Rusty. "He told me all about it on the way in. Parrish had tried to git Fred to do the engravin' for him. He offered to give Fred a third of the profits; but he wouldn't tell Fred where it was bein' done, nor who was in on the deal. Fred stalled him off. He needed money to pay his debts, an' Parrish said he'd pay the debt to Pollard if Fred would engrave jist one plate.

"Then Fred an' Harris walked into the Nine Drag an' got themselves captured. Parrish knowed Harris was a detective, an' he swore Fred had tipped him off about the counterfeitin'. Bond was there, an' he wanted to kill both of 'em, but Parrish wouldn't do it. Parrish made Fred do the work on them plates, anyway.

"They separated Fred an' Harris, but Fred said they told him Harris escaped an' they killed him. Fred knew he was suspected of robbin' his own mother. They also told him jist how they had things all fixed so they could blow everythin' to hell, in case anybody got wise. Fred was scared they would blow him up; so tonight they was all gone, except Broken Nose, who had been drinkin', an' Fred had decided to make a break when Broken Nose came in with his supper. I reckon you know the rest."

"I reckon I do." Hashknife smiled and Rusty went into the other room with the prosecuting attorney.

The miners looked curiously at Hashknife as he stepped into the doorway, and Nell Austin came up to him, her eyes filled with tears. She looked at him for quite awhile, and the tall cowboy smiled down at her.

"Fred has told us everything," she said, choking a little. "Tell me how you knew, Hashknife."

"I didn't know," he said softly. "I reckon I jist made-believe, Nell."

A man stepped into the room, and they turned to see Doc Pollard. He was cold eyed, and he looked years older. He glanced at Hashknife, but switched his eyes to Nell as he said:

"I'm not asking anybody to forgive

me," he said. "I made a damn fool of myself, but that's all in the game. I'm glad Fred is cleared, and that poker debt is canceled. I played a crooked game with him, because I had a reason for wanting him broke. I bought the ranch in good faith, and was paid in worthless money; so I'll get the place back.

"But I'm no rancher. You can have it. Pay me when you can and what you can. No, I don't want any thanks. I play the game, straight or crooked, but I know when I've lost."

Pollard turned abruptly on his heel and walked out. Cooper passed him in the doorway and went straight to Hashknife.

"Hartley, how on earth did they work that payroll? The good money is all in that valise. How did they do it?"

"It was a smart trick," said Hashknife. "Bond knew the denominations of the bills an' the amount of the payroll; so he made up a dummy package. The holdup of the stage was a bluff. After they tied up the sheriff, they swapped money. I knew they had planted the money some place, an' where would be a better place than with Bond? It was just a hunch on my part."

"Hunch!" snorted Cooper. "If I had it, I'd call it brains."

Sleepy pushed into the room.

"Broken Nose is tellin' the whole works to the prosecutor," he said. "Man, what a talker that jigger is. He jist said that Frazee was nominated to kill you; so he went up to our room that night. But Bond, like a dang fool, squatted out there on a shed, not knowin' Frazee was after you, an' loaded Frazee with buckshot."

"Those boys shore had playful ideas," said Hashknife, as he turned to Cooper. "I've got some money in your bank, Cooper. It's more than we need, an' bein' as the bank is closed, could you let me an' Sleepy have a couple hundred. You can give the rest to old Mrs. Austin. They ain't got a danged cent. Can you do it?"

"Do you want the money now, Hartley?"

"If you can work it thataway."

"Hartley, you can have half the bank, if you ask for it."

"A couple hundred will fix us up fine. We're kinda simple folks."

Hashknife looked across the room at Nell Austin, and their eyes met. It was goodby, but Nell Austin did not know it. Fred was sitting in a chair, still dazed and sick.

Fifteen minutes later the two cowboys were riding knee to knee over the road which led to Summit. The stars were tumbling down on the broken outline of the distant ranges, and far behind them were the twinkling lights of Concha City. It was like these two drifting cowboys to ride away into the night. They did not want thanks. Their work was over, and they were heading into the hills again.

"It was good to see them women pawin' Fred Austin around," said Sleepy. "Ma Austin never said anythin' for quite a long time after she puts her arms around him, an' then she says, 'My son was dead—an' he came back to me.' I said, 'He never was dead, but he didn't miss it more 'n a hair, I'll tell you that.' Do you know, pardner, I was scared for awhile?"

"Scared, Sleepy? Scared of what?"

"Scared that you was in love with Nell Austin. Honest, I was. You had sort of a funny look in your eyes when you looked at her. Tell the truth, Hashknife; wasn't you jist a little bit—you know?"

"No-o-o," drawled Hashknife softly, "I was jist makin'-believe."

"An' so the damn liar rode on over the hill," said Sleepy softly.

THE END

The Isle of

A Novelette of the West Indies

VICE-CONSUL RONEY dealt first with the American skipper who stood, papers in hand, outside the shabby office rail. Then Johnny turned to the woman whom he had invited to be seated beside his desk.

Johnny Roney stared at her wonderingly. What he knew of Mrs. Keith was merely that she had arrived at Atengo this morning on the Fruit Line ship and puzzled him with a brief query.

But now she stood by the sun cracked, hurricane faded map of the West Indies on the consulate wall, spanning with her fingers some twenty degrees of latitude of the Carib sea. And when she knew that Vice-Consul Roney was watching her, she jerked her hand away as if some one, of all the thousands of islands, were a point of accusing fire.

Johnny was not quite the kid he looked. He'd been thinking:

"Well, what'll the gang do with her? Stayin' over a steamer, and not a place to put her except Dowle's Hotel—that ghastly hole! And not a woman you'd call white to introduce her to, except that one who keeps house for Jenkins out the Windward Road, and she— Well, it won't do!" The vice-consul creaked around in his rusty chair.

"My dear lady, there's some mistake. Your husband—Ned Keith—no such man on this perishin' island. Not any man named Keith."

Mrs. Keith smiled confidently.

"Oh, but there is. Or was. I have a letter from him, dated last August. Or, perhaps, not exactly letters."

The vice-consul leaned forward inter-

SILENCE

By

CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

estedly. He wished to appear entirely official, but this Mrs. Keith was young and pretty, and her eyes friendly. So Johnny stammered in an entirely unofficial manner:

"Ah—not letters? You heard from him but—er—that is—"

"For eight years," resumed Mrs. Keith calmly, "my husband sent me remittances each month from Atengo. Four months ago they ceased. So I came here to find out about him—and, of course, to the American consulate first, Mr. Roney."

"Oh, certainly. Quite right. But you mean for eight years you never saw your husband? Never knew what he was doin' here on Atengo?"

Her gray eyes flitted briefly from him to the high window. The dull stupor of the obscure West Indian town was only part of the silence within the consulate; this woman from Home was thinking swiftly before she answered. Then a smile came to her cautious lips.

"Well, it sounds unusual, but not when I explain, Mr. Roney. I married Mr. Keith when I was just a kid. I'd come on from Ohio to New York. He was up from South America where he was in some sort of exporting business—he said. Well, we married, and things went wrong. His business—whatever it was—went to smash, and my family didn't approve of him. So there was a silly quarrel. Ned was terribly sensitive. He left a note taking all the blame. Then I heard nothing till he wrote me from a place in Venezuela—La Guaira—just one letter. Ned said

he'd take care of me as long as he lived. Then he wrote from Trinidad. That's a British colony, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Johnny, thinking she ought to know, surely.

"Well," resumed Mrs. Keith, "that Trinidad letter was purely a business one. Ned promised to send me fifty pounds a month. On one condition: that I never write him or seek to find him. Well, I accepted, thinking it would be a temporary arrangement, you see. One would guess that he had his—reasons—" Mrs. Keith paused, a trifle confused at Johnny's smile. But she didn't explain more of her conclusion as she hurried on, "Well, nothing ever came out of the silence except an envelop each month—no letters, just an envelop addressed in Ned's hand, postmarked Atengo, B. W. I, and enclosing a fifty pound Bank of England note."

The American vice-consul threw up his hands.

"Oh, quite impossible! From this island? No man here earns that much, let alone sending it to a—wife. We're a beggarly lot, Mrs. Keith. Joe Chen, the Chinese trader, is the only fella with money. In fact we all owe him a pound or so. There are but nineteen white men on Atengo, and none such as you describe as your husband. I've been here five years, and I've known every man who came or went, Yanks or not. No Keith—"

Mrs. Keith interrupted to place a square brown envelop on his desk.

"No? Well, I've had scores of these, in Ned's handwriting. Here's the last: August, four months ago. Don't think it's the money I came to see about, Mr. Roney."

"No—" Johnny grinned—"you loved the chap. But you should have inquired years ago. Why didn't you?"

"I know. I feel frightfully guilty. But Ned's orders. I imagined he was in some sort of trouble, and I might make it worse. Then it stretched to years and I did make an effort, an inquiry to the State Department; but nothing was done or learned, apparently."

"Must have been before I came here," mused Johnny. "You feared you'd harm him by seeking him, eh? Well, of course, lots of men vanish down the tropics. But this money remitted to you regularly from Atengo—" he stared at the brown envelop. " Well, the stamp is the King's own. Addressed to you at Cleveland, Ohio,"

THE vice-consul grumbled uneasily. He had hoped to be a Career Man in the service, if Washington ever heard of him, and of course his business was to listen to American citizens in distress. But Mrs. Keith was calm, and he was in distress. He mopped his pink brow and tried to speak officially.

"Oh, well, we'll nip into that. Some one'll know. Ha! Of course, the postmark. But a Keith? I never heard of a Keith on Atengo."

Mrs. Keith faced him squarely.

"Mr. Roney, do you think he was murdered? Four months ago—when his remittances ceased?"

Johnny grinned.

"Murdered? Quite impossible. There's been no murder here in twelve years. Not even a black one. Gosh, how we'd love it! Atengo is law abiding to the point of boresome tears. No mystery possible here—a case of tonsilitis is discussed for weeks. Just ask the inspector of the constabulary. Durlich would relish a killin'. Murder? Oh, no! Nothin' like that."

Mrs. Keith was looking out the high windows. Just below was the waterside street. Dismal little buildings on this side, and on the other, vacant weed lots giving down to the beach which was flecked with clumps of ragged coco palms. The one wharf, with its corrugated iron warehouse, jutted out over limpid water. At its shore end stood the one clean, well painted building of the port—the big white store of Joe Chen, exporter and general trader.

The grimy shade of Queen's Square stretched beyond, and across this, under the *guango* and silk cotton trees, behind a fence heaped with pink coralita, was Dowle's Hotel. Silent, noisome, uninviting.

Mrs. Keith winced at the memory of her hour's stay there. Johnny Roney understood that. And he wanted to be helpful. But he knew more than she. So he leaned forward and repeated what he recalled from the years of his service on Atengo.

"No Keith here. I'm sure—absolutely."

"But Ned—" she insisted, and Johnny broke in again. A white man in the tropics should not get excited after ten o'clock, and it was close to noon.

"Mrs. Keith, Atengo is just one level garden spot. Thirty miles long and some twenty wide. Climb the light tower and you'll see it all. Bananas, bananas—every acre planted, and the open roads lead from village to village. I know every owner and manager. Why, there's hardly a bit of fence corner jungle where one could chuck a murdered man. The port hasn't even a slum. Everybody works, except—" he jabbed his pencil toward the window—"those chaps. Beach bums. Always two or three with us, but there they are—open to inspection."

Back of Chen's store, on the sand, she saw a hut with a grass thatch roof, a dirty skiff staked in the shallows, and a seine on a drying frame. A yellow haired and bearded man tossed in sweaty sleep when the sun lanced through the coco palm tops to his face.

"So you see," Johnny went on, "no mystery possible here. Atengo's a terrible hole, unless you're crazy about bananas. Or your pals. Now, take our gang at the Club. A poor little beast of a club, and if Dick Yates and Aleshire and myself didn't keep the bar goin' with our patronage the Club would close. Aleshire lives there, but Yates and I have a bungalow back on the ridge. Yates is a Yank by way of a number of places. Nobody asks why, you know. Now he's agent for some New York firm, and manages to exist."

Mrs. Keith listened interestedly. Johnny rattled on. Merely looking at a clean, well gowned woman from the States was an event in his meager routine, needing no mystery to enhance her.

"And wait till you meet Aleshire." He smiled. "Good family back in England, but here he is—port officer in this hole. We never ask why. But he dresses for dinner—and not a woman of—of our kind within two days' sailin'." Johnny mopped his brow again. "Really, I don't see why we stick it, and let the world slide by. There was a real consul here once, but he went home and Washington forgot to appoint a new one. So I stick it."

Mrs. Keith smiled like a very young mother to another one's child:

"I know why you stick it. Because of your two pals."

Then she glanced out the window across Waterside Street. The sandspit, with its line of palms five miles across the roadstead, was showing a crinkle of white on the coral barrier beyond as the trade wind lifted, and there was a black smudge in this.

"Why, I thought ships called here only each fortnight? Isn't that one rounding the shoals?"

"No. Just a derelict. Lodged there for years. You didn't notice it comin' in this mornin'? The Fruit Line people usually point it out. Queer story about her—but long ago. A skipper named Birge had her in the inter-island trade. He lost her in a gale when they took to the boats. But the schooner rode in a year later on another hurricane, and lodged on the *palisados*. Aleshire says that Birge is frightened about her now, when he trades in and out with his new ship, the *Ruata*—that one lying off the customs wharf now."

"Birge?" said Mrs. Keith. "What's he frightened about?"

"Oh, nothin', I imagine. Just sailors' ideas. He abandoned her and she

followed him. Nothin' but a hulk now. Hangout for the beach bums when the sea let's 'em get to her. They cadge rum at Yanna's native bar and hold big drink fests on her, Inspector Durlich says. Birge and Joe Chen have the *Ruata* in the island trade. Chen's the money backer, of course."

"I met him on the wharf," said Mrs. Keith absently. "Decent sort of Chinaman, I thought. Well, Mr. Roney, you can't help me?"

JOHNNY looked worried again. He wanted to be pleasant and lead her away from this missing husband business. So he glanced out the window. The ancient carriage which had brought Mrs. Keith from Dowle's Hotel to the consulate was at its usual stand across Waterside Street. The grizzled old cabby, Dorgin, and his bony horse, both seemed slumbering. For years, Johnny mused, he'd seen Dorgin there, waiting for fares . . . How could the fellow live?

As he watched, old Dorgin roused himself; some one had spoken to him from the shade of the giant silk cotton tree nearby. Birge, master of the *Ruata*, a slender, browned white man, had stopped by the carriage.

Johnny watched the two idly as he listened to Mrs. Keith. Dorgin's rum bloated cheek was turned, his watery eyes blinked—he might have been trying to hear the voices from the consulate gallery windows, or to what Skipper Birge was saying. Then Birge went on to Chen's store and old Dorgin slumped again on his cushioned seat.

The vice-consul's mind clicked back to Mrs. Keith.

"Help you? My dear lady, certainly, to the last punch! But a missin' husband—sendin' you a fifty pound note every month for eight years? From Atengo? Impossible! There's no bank here. The steamship office and Chen's store attend to all money affairs for us."

"If my husband's not here now, then he died here."

"No white man's died here in three years. Nor none went away. I've known 'em all for five years back. There was no Keith." Then Johnny hesitated. "Do you suppose he's here under another name—for some reason? But actually, there are only six Americans on Atengo: Yates and myself, and four chaps in the Fruit Line office. Now, let's check up the other white men. One Jewish insurance agent. Three Syrians who peddle about the native villages. The native white islander, Dowle, who keeps the hotel. Then there's the resident commissioner, Durlich of the constabulary, and Aleshire, port officer, all blinkin' Britishers, my dear lady. The other five are all colonials, resident managers for the fruit company out on the back plantations. Decent, hard workin' chaps—I'll take you out to meet every one of 'em. Nineteen white men in all."

Mrs. Keith smiled wanly. He knew he hadn't convinced her of a thing. But Johnny went on victoriously.

"So, here we are. There are the three beach bums, but whether white or not, they don't count. Derelicts like 'em are always bein' kicked off ships, cadgin' about port, and then signin' out somewhere else when a skipper'll take 'em. But none of the three here has been on Atengo for six months. So no Keith ever sent you that money for eight years from Atengo."

He'd failed again. Mrs. Keith was still smiling. A hurt, brave smile, and then she tapped the brown envelop.

"There's his writing, addressed to me. And here's his photograph. Of course, it's more than eight years old. Taken in New York when we were married."

Johnny studied it. A full faced, level eyed man, with a resolute jaw. An alert, likable American business man type. Johnny sighed.

"That proves my point, Mrs. Keith. No such man as that has been here in five years. I've known 'em all." Then he went on more kindly, "So there's no masquerader here—Keith, under another name to us."

"Then how about these envelops postmarked Atengo?"

Johnny shrugged.

"I'll see Joe Chen. The post is handled at his store. There are four rural boxes, and a constable collects. Now, letters mailed, year after year, with such distinctive handwriting—the post clerk'll remember. He's a half-breed chap named Merdank. Hate to say it, dear lady, but some one's been foolin' you for years. Only that money—a new fifty-pound banknote every month—it's incredible!"

"Well," she said slowly, "what'll I do now? I had to have a reason for being here, so I told the customs clerk and the shipping people, and Dowle, at the hotel, that I was botanizing. Hunting orchids through the West Indian islands."

The vice-consul relaxed. That was good. He knew that the port was seething with curiosity, within two hours, about this strange woman who'd been closeted with him at the consulate.

"Orchids? Fine! Now, I'll call Dorgin, and you go back to Dowles. Remember, don't stir out in the heat of the day. I'll call later and tell you all I discover."

Mrs. Keith was pointing out the window. A rattly, faded little car had stopped at the dingy veranda of the Club half a block westward, and a stout man had got out, looking toward the limp flag above the consulate porch.

"Of course that's one of the gang?" Mrs. Keith smiled.

"Right. Yates—and we always meet for a gin and tonic now. Good for fever. There's no fever, but the gin holds out."

He saw her to Dorgin's dusty carriage.

VICE-CONSUL JOHNNY was pleased to know that Port Officer Aleshire was lunching with the Fruit Line captain on board the *San Marco*. The Britisher had a line of ragging which frequently got on the vice-consular nerves. Dick Yates was bad enough. The two sat at their usual table on the sea wall veranda of the Club looking through the screens at the spread of beach which ended beyond Joe Chen's store. From the Club to Chen's, along the waterside, was about all of the port which came within a white man's purview. Back of the one street began the lanes and huts of the black banana hands, now on the four hour shift passing the green bunches from the wharf warehouse to the *San Marco's* holds.

This was the only moving thing. The group on the store porch, the crouched vegetable higglers, the rum shop idlers, might have been stage props against the paint of blue sea, the garish white and green of shore and trees. Before the little red brick jail one of Inspector Durlich's black constables stood erect, white bloused, blue trousered, his red stripes and brass buttons a flash of alien color against the drab dullness of the street.

Yates' broad face relaxed with the second midday drink.

"Our honorable port officer unloaded a lady on you, did he, Johnny, m' lad? Wouldn't stand it. Your business is to hand skippers their papers and start the waves runnin' for their nice little ships. Nothing else. By the way, who is she?"

"I knew you'd never ask." Johnny grinned. "Name's Keith. From Ohio. Huntin' orchids all down the Leewards. I'm borrowin' your car, fella, to take her over the back plantin's and let her meet every one."

"Righto," murmured Yates. "Have her here for tea, also, likely."

Dick owned the worst of the five motor cars on Atengo. Joe Chen had just imported a big shiny American one, and Yates hoped, by cross-breeding, that every one would have a fairly decent flivver in a few years. Like Aleshire, Yates maintained that he hated women.

They discussed Mrs. Keith and the foolishness of orchids as a quest over the lazy luncheon, and then went to the wharf to see the steamship away. A fortnightly rite for every white man in port.

Then Roney stopped off at Chen's store. Beyond Queen's Square he saw Dorgin's shabby victoria before the unpainted wooden fence of Dowle's Hotel. The old sailorman-cabby apparently was clinging to Mrs. Keith as the only possible fare this week.

Chen came from the obscurity of his back office, his faint bland smile deepening, to greet the American vice-consul. Birge, the inter-island schooner master, drowsed in a chair on the front porch, and Merdank, the thin shouldered postal clerk, was at his cubby window making up his bimonthly steamer day entries.

Johnny made a casual inquiry about this Keith—just some ancient matter of his consular files, he put it. Chen listened gravely, shook his head after some thought. He'd been trading here some eight or ten years. No, no recollection of any Keith.

"Nor any letters ever mailed out to a Keith in the States?" asked Johnny lazily. "Of course, as far as you know?"

Chen shrugged. His careful, correct English was as smooth as his polished black hair or his tailored pongee clothes.

"Of course, Mr. Roney, as far as I know. And I'd know. Merdank makes up the out mail, but I look to it a bit. But we have no way of recalling about ordinary mail. Is it important, sir?"

"Well, not so very." Johnny idled along the counters. "Not an official query, really. If the post doesn't know, that ends it."

Chen's broad figure swung along with him to the door. He had the old time Chinaman's habit of keeping each hand thrust under the cuff of the other sleeve as he talked or walked. At the rear of his place black men were trundling the big ice blocks from wharf to sawdust pits, and Chen went that way to see the job ended.

But Johnny heard the clackety-clack of old Dorgin's bony nag out on Waterside Street. Mrs. Keith was passing, sitting upright, fresh gowned, alert, on her way to the consulate. Johnny grumbled. Wouldn't people from home ever learn to keep indoors from the sun till four o'clock?

Then he heard the tip of a chair. Birge had sat forward, his lean, dark jaw thrust out, his narrow eyes watching the ancient carriage.

Dorgin drove stolidly, flicking his frayed whip on the animal's patchy rump. Birge muttered and sat back as Roney passed to the sun wracked silence of the street. When the vice-consul reached his office, Mrs. Keith was seated by his desk within the railed enclosure.

Johnny scolded her and she smiled distantly—she wasn't used to siestas, and besides Dowle's rooms were mildew-smelly.

She had placed another of those stout, brown envelops on his table. Johnny frowned at it unpleasantly.

"Well, I asked Chen—of course, not connecting you with it. Joe never heard of a Keith. No remembrance of any letters mailed from Atengo to you, Mrs. Keith. He said he'd ask the post clerk, Merdank."

"These postmarks," she retorted, with that calm smile of certainty.

"Oh, I know! Puzzlin'—give me a day or two, please. But say, tell me something about home. Gee, it's been years since I—I—"

THEY fell to talking of the States, and she saw his wistfulness. College, and then drifting down through Latin-America. A consular clerkship, and then he thought he'd stick to it. Go to Washington and study for a career man. But he didn't, somehow. Landed in this speck of the British Empire, and stuck. Nobody here a fellow cared for except Yates and the Britisher, Aleshire. But Durlich of the constabulary wasn't a bad sort—they made four at billiards and patched up the cloth themselves when they knocked it ragged. Aleshire cursed like the lord he would be when he went home. But nobody earned half of fifty pounds a month.

She listened, and before they knew it dusk came. Johnny put her in Dorgin's rickety victoria. She smiled. Tea at the Club tomorrow? Surely!

"Only woman we ever had," murmured Johnny.

He went up and closed his office. Quite dark when he went to the club. Gosh, she'd have a rotten dinner at Dowle's. Even steamer days Dowle would serve goat mutton and breadfruit . . .

They had their drinks and ragged Johnny a lot at the Club dinner—Aleshire in evening clothes and his eye piece falling out of his lean, ascetic face. Women again—and Yates yawned. Post war women. But the world had gone on quite a bit, Johnny put in. Now, Mrs. Keith—her skirts were almost indecently long since he saw a lot of pretty girls on a cruise ship which put in to Atengo with a broken rudder. Ten months ago —but how he remembered!

The three were at their never ending billiards over the worn table, when snatches of talk came from the bar. Two bearded planters in laced boots and corduroys were talking.

"Well, Durlich's got charge now. Say, the beggar was copped just after he'd left this American woman at Dowle's. Talk about blood—it was drippin' from the carriage seat! Split from skull to—"

Johnny thrust his head from the billiard room. "What's that, Cromer? Blood—Mrs. Keith?"

The planter laughed excitedly.

"Hello, Roney! Haven't you heard? Dorgin, the cabby—all chopped up . . . "

"Mrs. Keith," Johnny repeated. "Did she see it?"

"No. Dorgin'd let her out at Dowle's gate. Then he drove to the turn of the lane, apparently. Anyway, Dowle's yard boy found him there, and let out a shriek. First murder we've ever had, I say!"

The other planter turned to the port officer.

"Aleshire, could the killer have been a stowaway off the fruit ship? No passenger landed except the American lady. What do you think?"

Aleshire put impeccable cuffs on the bar. His brief glance took in Roney's stubborn silence.

"Oh, just a black man's wrangle. Rum in, brains out . . . I say, Yates, it's your shot."

"Billiards, hell!" whispered Johnny. "I'm goin' to Dowle's. Mrs. Keith'll be all upset over this."

"And from America?" Aleshire smiled. "But on my word, we never had a murder till the lady arrives—hunting orchids."

Johnny cursed under his breath. He'd not mentioned this missing man business to his friends. Now he set his lips tighter. He knew the group watched him curiously as he strode up the waterside. At this hour the port's business was done, even the last native shop closed. Chen's store front had the only bright oil lamp of the street, and Johnny passed it to the somber shade of Queen's Square. A man sauntered out from a walk as if he'd been on watch here. But it was Captain Birge of the *Ruata,* and not a black policeman. Birge nodded shortly.

"He ain't there now, Mr. Roney. They put him on Chen's ice. Terrible mess, mister. There's Inspector Durlich comin' from another look—"

Johnny met Durlich in the starry dusk.

"I don't want to see any murdered man. But Mrs. Keith—Dorgin drove her about."

The portly constable was breathing a bit thickly. When a police officer has never had a murder in all his tenure of office he has a right to feelings. Still, Durlich was British.

"No end bad, my boy—happened just after dusk. And what motive? A poor old chap, perfectly harmless. No known enemies, no relations even. The fact is, on inquiry, we find that nothing is known about Dorgin except that he's been here eight years."

"Eight years?" Johnny echoed.

Queer, now! Eight years ago Mrs. Keith's remittances began, out of the silence of this island.

Roney stared at a white helmeted policeman behind the khaki clad inspector. A few ragged black men edged from the shadows and Durlich ordered them home.

"The story's gone like wildfire," he explained. "You know how these people are. Terrorized like children in the dark. I'm off to inform the resident. How about Yates' car?"

"Go hop it. He's at the Club. Any arrests, Durlich?"

"I took in those three beach bums, naturally. But Dorgin wasn't robbed. Somebody reached from the bush and put a *machete* to him. No footprints. I lay it to those beach beggars—filthy lot, for white men. Carousin' out on Birge's wreck, or sleepin' on the sand, and fishin' a bit as an excuse for their vagrancy. I'll question 'em."

Johnny went to Dowle's hotel. Durlich was excited but no more so than the yellow clerk there. Dowle was absent. When Mrs. Keith came down the musty stairs Johnny gasped. A dinner gown, soft, clinging, and a frangipani bud in her hair. He stared at it blankly.

"I went out and picked it a moment ago by the front fence. The dark comes quickly here, doesn't it? I had to feel for the flowers."

THE front fence . . . That frangipani grew near the lot corner—and not two yards away old Dorgin had been butchered . . .

But she didn't know yet. Johnny smiled absently. "Which way does your room face, Mrs. Keith? You know, down here we call the trade wind from the sea 'the Doctor'. And the land breeze, comin' at night, is 'the Undertaker'. Supposed to bring fever, you know. Silly idea. Modern science has exploded all that."

"My room faces the sea. Dowle said it was cooler. I look over the beach. Saw those tramps cooking about a little fire in front of their hut. Beachcombers, you call them?"

Johnny was feverish.

"All evenin' you saw them, Mrs. Keith?"

She looked narrowly at him. She drew a long breath, and a forced little laugh came from her unsmiling lips.

"Why, yes—all evening. I saw them all—three—while I dressed. Why do you ask?"

Roney muttered. She had her hands out to the massed bougainvillea of the veranda rail; she was afraid of nothing, crawling or creeping. Johnny turned abruptly.

"You know Durlich's got a case—first he ever had? Murder!"

"Yes? Some one killed?"

"Oh, Lord! I just ran in—thought you'd be—upset."

"Why should I be? Who's dead?"

"Dorgin. The poor old cabby who drove you here. He must have been killed five minutes after he left you at the door."

"The poor old man!" She came nearer. "Mr. Roney, you're awfully upset."

Johnny was. She wasn't telling the truth—all the truth.

"Mrs. Keith, about—er—your husband. I asked the curate and he'll look up the parish records. Called up the resident, but the old chap's been here but two years and knows nothing. I saw the tax officer, and even asked some of the old colored folks. But not a word about any Keith."

"Those post marked envelops—" she began, and the vice-consul muttered irritably at her smile.

"You say you're sure it's his handwriting on them?"

"Quite sure. But I've thought of something. A man's writing, it seems to me, might change a bit in eight years, mightn't it, as he grew older? These never have varied by a single line, I notice now."

Johnny nodded.

"Meanin' just what? I asked Chen

and he knew nothing of Keith or Keith's letters. I'm goin' after Merdank and ride him hard. The chap handles the mail and he ought to remember."

Mrs. Keith watched him keenly—that is what Johnny remembered afterward. Keen and silent, as if she were wrapping herself in the somber mystery of the island. Then she sighed, as if she were dealing with a sophomoric amateur at living.

"Mr. Roney, I'm a bit tired. You'd better run along."

Mr. Roney did, but a block away, passing Chen's store, he halted testily.

"She thinks I'm hopeless. Incompetent, or being made a fool of by some people here. Well, that post clerk's the next clue. If he won't answer I'll take it up with the resident."

He strode on through the starlight. Yates was waiting for him at the Club.

But five yards beyond, from the bowered lane fence, a figure loomed and a voice muttered:

"Mr. Roney, sir—the American consul?" The man touched his cap. "Can you tell me, please, if the lady who came today is huntin' orchids? This Mrs. Keith, at the hotel—"

"Who the devil are you?" Johnny's voice rose sharply.

"Name's Coombs, sir. Seaman from the *Ruata*. Captain Birge's schooner, sir. But I heard at the shippin' office the lady was studyin' orchids. Now I know where orchids are. Out Moretta way—"

"Coombs—seaman from the *Ruata*? How does it come you know about orchids?" Johnny leaned closer.

But the sailor was concealing nothing. He went on humbly:

"I been in Brazil, sir. Wandered, lookin' for orchids. Here they ain't nothin' to Brazil, sir, but if the lady—"

"You'd like to talk to her about orchids, Coombs? Well, come to my office tomorrow morning, and I'll arrange it."

Coombs touched his hat and faded toward the beach. Johnny went on irritatedly. It was never really dark on Atengo, save in the nights of hurricane wrack, and when he looked back from the next corner he saw another man turning from the lane down to the beach path which Coombs had taken. Save for the riding lights of the *Ruata*, and those of a lone rum schooner farther out, the port was wrapped in this glimmer of starlight.

Johnny halted again before the Club steps. The troubled idea that he was being shadowed, or that sailor, Coombs, was being followed, grew in him. When Yates called to him from the veranda he started. It was good to get back in the dim card room for a nightcap drink. But the one houseboy on duty stared at him from the hall as he fetched the liquor.

Dick's drawling banter was good to hear.

"Well, was the lady upset a bit? Aleshire's been called to the resident's to confer about our killin', and Durlich's off on the back roads on some theory or other about Dorgin havin' an enemy among the Jenkins field boys."

"Oh, Lord," grunted Johnny. "Talk of something else, will you? And say—how about the car to show Mrs. Keith about, eh?"

They drove home through the whispering smother of the banana lined roads, and their frightened cookboy was crouched at the door.

"Lucky to have him at all," said Dick. "Most of the blacks run out back to their native villages when they get in a funk."

MORNING was the usual hot calm. From the bungalow there was a bit of sea view. The reefs faintly crinkling in the haze beyond the *palisados*, with one black dot marking the resting place of Birge's long forgotten derelict. Something dank, formless, that had been belched from the sea years ago. A hulk that had blundered in one stormy midnight to lodge on Atengo reef where all men might see—and no man cared to see,

or know more than port gossip ran. Birge's first trading schooner, down the Out Islands, before he came to Atengo and prospered with Joe Chen's cargo carrying . . .

Johnny and Dick drove to port and work under the peace and silence of the island green. At the consulate Roney's halfbreed clerk and runner brought some papers to the desk and stood fidgeting. Roney glanced up with a scowl different from his habitual good nature.

"What's ailin' you, Nathan? Nerves?"

"Yes, sir!" The clerk gulped explosively. "Haven't you heard, sir?" Another man found dead this morning! Chopped up by a cane knife—a sailor from Captain Birge's schooner named Coombs."

"Coombs?" grunted Johnny, and creaked back in his chair. "Ah, yes; Coombs. Hop over to the customs with these papers, Nathan."

He wanted to be alone. His face twitched. Coombs, who had wanted to talk to Mrs. Keith about orchids last night . . . Dorgin, the wheezy old sailor who had clung to her with his cab from the hour of her arrival . . . Johnny winced. It wouldn't do to bother the local officials about some ghost man named Keith now.

In all Atengo's dull annals no murder had occurred, but two men had been struck down in the dark within the twenty-four hours since Mrs. Keith arrived.

Johnny tipped forward in his chair, staring.

"Somebody'll see that soon—she'll be dragged in. No talk about Ned Keith possible till these killings are explained."

He went to the Club for a drink alone. Inspector Durlich came to the bar presently, fit as to khaki and swagger stick but tired of eye.

"Of course you've heard, Roney?"

"Coombs? What the devil's goin' on here?"

"Can't make it, Johnny. I jailed the three beach bums last night to quiz 'em about Dorgin. Then Dowle phoned me that the American lady had a word to say. Went there and she said she saw them at their shack all evenin'. And now they were in jail when Coombs was whacked down under the wharf end some time last night. So they didn't do either job. But I'm holdin' 'em a bit longer."

Aleshire strolled in, absolutely correct for a Briton anywhere in the tropics. He twigged the inspector's sleeve.

"Old chap, this makes two stowed on Chen's ice till the inquests. No desire to impede justice, but when can you have 'em off? You know our bar ice comes from there, of course."

"Disgustin'," murmured Johnny. "A murderer roamin' the roads, and here you go, Aleshire. Stick to beer—bottled!"

The inspector turned to the consul gratefully. "Roney, mind steppin' over to the jail? One of the beach men is a cripple from Grand Cayman. The other a cockney, Landers. But the third's a Yank. Says he was an engineer, but drink got him—and all that. However, bein' an American, you'd best talk to him. Name's Keller. I'd deported him long ago, but where to? He beat up his mate on a schooner and was kicked ashore four months ago."

"Four months?" repeated Johnny mechanically. Four months! That was when Mrs. Keith's remittances ceased. Her impossible husband had vanished when this beachcomber arrived at Atengo! Johnny's head was swirling. He followed the grumbling Durlich to the little red brick jail, conscious of a change which was hard to bring to reality. The same quiet street, the huddle of market women in the square, black men before the rum shops, the deserted fruit line wharf.

But the port was stunned. At midmorning of tropic calm the shadow of death hovered. The broad green of the banana plantings closed the village about, choked it in heat and silence—then Roney knew he stood in the steamy jail, sniffing at the smell of disinfectants, staring at three caged men.

The cripple from Cayman did not even

turn his head from the bunk. Landers, a weazened little cockney, sneered at the uneasy inspector. Keller, the tall American, shoved back yellow hair from his bitter eyes, and came directly to the bars.

"Roney, eh? The American consul—come to help me! I'm in a jam, am I? Not that I know of—" his mocking voice broke to laughter. "You, a damned cub like you, actin' consul!"

Roney controlled his temper. Durlich growled and swung his stick to Keller's fingers gripped on the bars.

"Here, none o' that!"

The yellow maned prisoner deliberately turned his back. The cockney yelled derision.

"The consul, eh? 'Is democratic 'Ighness! Tell 'im to send a drink, matey, an' we'll kiss 'is baby cheeks."

"You see?" complained Durlich. "That's all I get. Cool and insultin'. But they didn't do in Dorgin or Coombs. Not possible."

Johnny turned to the door.

"Turn 'em loose, Durlich. They can't get away from Atengo, and they might drop a word later that'd be useful. I've seen Keller before. No good in me askin' him questions."

He saw Keller again as the turnkey closed the iron door. The gaunt man's eyes glittered through the cage with the same baleful challenge for humankind which an ill used captive lion might have. That odd hair—sun scorched, as if the adventurer had gone months uncovered to the tropic rays, and lived through them—was tossed from his brown brow in mocking carelessness.

BACK in his office the vice-consul was trying to study Keller's insolence when Mrs. Keith tripped up the stairs, fresh and steady eyed. He thought it queer that she adverted at once to Atengo's second horror, giving him no chance to theorize about it.

"Frightful, isn't it—do you know Dowle's help has left him? Had to make the coffee himself. I believe the man wishes I weren't at his hotel. He's awfully shaky over this last one."

But her own voice was cool, and her eyes were keenly reading Johnny's. He hadn't told Durlich that this man, Coombs, had wanted to talk to Mrs. Keith about orchids—and death had stopped his tongue. No use in mentioning Coombs to Mrs. Keith just now, Johnny thought.

He walked to the hotel with her, and noted now that none of the other four cabmen sought her patronage. And Johnny summoned none. The waterside seemed watchful from afar; he wondered if Mrs. Keith noticed the silence of men when she passed.

Birge, of the *Ruata,* was in his usual lounging place when in port—a chair on the store porch. Joe Chen stood in the door and bowed his wonted grave courtesy to strangers. Back of Chen, Roney saw Merdank slipping like a furtive rabbit to the postoffice enclosure.

"You haven't said anything to Chen about the letters?" Johnny asked suddenly, when they had passed.

"No. I left it to you—as you requested. Then I thought, with these two murders here, Mr. Chen wouldn't have the time."

Johnny studied her briefly.

"Why, what would that have to do with it?"

"Well, nothing, of course. But you say every one's upset."

Johnny was about to say, "Every one except yourself." Joe Chen was the other calm fatalist here, but one would expect it of the Oriental, perhaps. The consul looked back. Chen was in the sun on his steps watching them enter Dowle's somber yard. Was there some secret understanding between Chen and Mrs. Keith about the letters? Some game the two were playing, either as partners or enemies?

Mrs. Keith spoke hurriedly as if reading Johnny's mind again, or intent on diverting some straying fancy of his.

"Mr. Chen's been very nice the few

times I met him at the store. He's liked here, isn't he?"

Johnny assented. From Dowle's porch they saw Keller carrying his crippled comrade from the jail back to the beach hut. His shoulders shone native brown under his yellow mane. When he saw Roney his hard smile flashed; to Mrs. Keith he gave the most indifferent glance.

"Very insultin' chap," grumbled Roney. "Calls me the banana ambassador. The three would have been in jail yet under suspicion if it hadn't been your word to Durlich, clearin' 'em."

"I saw them all on the beach during the time when he says Dorgin was killed. They were cooking and indulging in their usual horseplay. So I noted them particularly."

"The inspector wouldn't have freed them then, except that he had them safe in jail when the second killing took place. That sailor, Coombs—"Do you know, Mrs. Keith, that Coombs wanted to talk to you—about orchids? Queer, I thought."

Mrs. Keith's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wanted to see me? Well, orchids—I suppose every one here'd know I was looking them up. We agreed to say that, didn't we?"

Again Johnny had a sense of being baffled by having things flung back upon him. This woman seemed no longer curious; had she then found what she came for—at the cost of two lives? And again she seemed reading young Roney's thoughts as she said:

"Wanted to see me. Orchids . . . then he was killed. Queer, as you say. Rather a coincidence." Then she was talking of some commonplace as Johnny bade her good night. When he turned he saw Dowle's last black boy cringe away from her passing to the frowsy hall.

Halfway to Chen's store he saw the beach gang at those antics which were an insult to the waterside in its sinister fear. Keller was tossing frying fish into the air to catch them expertly in the pan. The crippled man was laughing. But Landers, the cockney, was not to be seen—then he was: by a palm clump close to the rough path that led to the back of Dowle's Hotel.

"Spyin' on Mrs. Keith's windows, looks to me. Don't like that."

Johnny grumbled when he joined Aleshire and the gloomy inspector at the Club. Durlich had nothing but vague guesses.

"The man who killed the two, gentlemen, was looked on by the victims as a friend. So they had no suspicion till they were bashed. Each a neat blow to the head. I'm making a report for the Government House secretary."

"You'll oblige, dear chap," added Aleshire, "if you call his attention to the ice. Bottled beer is not to my likin'."

Durlich grumbled his futility.

"The inquests developed nothing. I made the three beach men sign statements to send Government House the next post out." He tossed some official forms on the bar.

Johnny's lips tightened as he saw one signature. Aleshire smiled leisurely.

"Bad news, m' boy? Another lady from home?"

Roney laughed feverishly.

"Say, Durlich, mind if I take this one of Keller's to the office? Want to run over the files to see if there was anything ever on record about him."

"Take 'em along till tomorrow. Mere matter of form. But Keller's never been on Atengo before. The fella's too conspicuous to be forgotten."

Back in his office the vice-consul pulled Mrs. Keith's last remittance envelop from his desk. By it he placed Keller's signature on Durlich's form. Then Johnny sighed. There had seemed a startling resemblance till he compared them. Keith—Keller—but now he saw differences. The writing was not quite the same.

"Besides Keller wasn't here when the Keith letters were written and posted from Atengo. But they stopped when Keller arrived, four months ago."

Johnny sat back, groping at phantoms.

BEFORE luncheon he called in at Joe Chen's store. The stout Chinaman smiled amiably. Of course the two murders came up first.

"I've told Mr. Durlich, sir, he should see about the crew of that rum ship out by the point," said Chen.

"He's looked to it. They were all aboard when the jobs were done. But say, Chen—damn the killings. What I'm asking is about a man—Keith. Did you look into that matter? Your clerk surely'd remember if this letter was ever mailed here, and it certainly was."

Chen took the Keith letter, with its postmark of last August. Then he shook his head. His soft toneless voice flowed on.

"Quite true. But letters could be mailed here without attention. Some one could come ashore from the steamships and post them, sir."

"For eight years?" Johnny stared at him. "Nonsense, Chen. Say, where's your clerk, Merdank? I'd like to ask him a bit."

"Merdank is off to his luncheon," said Chen. "I'll take it up with him. This letter, sir, was addressed to the Mrs. Keith who is at Mr. Dowle's house, I suppose?"

Johnny nodded. He hadn't meant to commit himself on that, but it was quite essential now, and useless to evade with Chen. He grunted sourly to the merchant.

"She asked about the fella—some distant relative, I believe." Johnny turned at the door. "But I'd like to see the post clerk—"

Chen bowed assent. Roney went on to Dowle's and, from the lane corner, saw Chen's silk coat shining in the sun at the rear stoop of his store. He was watching either the beachcombers' camp below the palm clump, or Birge's schooner half a mile out on the glitter of the roadstead water. Then Johnny saw Keller arise slowly from the shade. He stood tall, erect, looking at Chen, and slowly his arm went up, as if in a mocking signal which Chen had not dared give.

Then he saw Mrs. Keith on Dowle's upper veranda looking seaward. It was a bit queer, this calm eyed woman from home amusing her idle hours with that jesting scarecrow of the beach below Chen's back door. She didn't see Johnny coming. When he was announced she came down the front stairs to Dowle's musty parlors.

The vice-consul laid the Keller signature on the table with a murmured apology: just happened on the thing; an odd resemblance, of course, but nothing of consequence . . .

Mrs. Keith glanced interestedly at the document. Then lifted cool eyes to Roney's disturbed ones.

"Queer, isn't it? Much like Ned's writing. You say that man Keller, on the beach, signed this?"

"Yes. And he came here just four months ago—when your remittances ceased from Atengo."

"And Ned vanished." She shivered slightly.

"He didn't vanish. He never was here, damn it all!"

Mrs. Keith smiled slowly.

"You're entitled to be vexed, Mr. Roney. You've been awfully kind. But I shall leave soon as I can. This island is—I don't know what to say. Silent, sinister. I feel as if a conspiracy were on so I'd not find the truth about Ned. As if you and every one here were trying to shield me from knowing."

"Mrs. Keith, we're not. Honestly, this hurts."

"Dear boy—" she smiled on—"I'm sorry. But Ned is dead, I'm sure. I'm beginning to hate this place!"

"Dead, maybe," muttered Johnny, "but not here. But this other thing: two poor common men have been killed . . . well, I don't know what to say. Every man on Atengo has been investigated. No clues, no motives; nothing but fright and a lot of silly talk. You know you're the only strange person on the island."

Johnny watched her to see how she

took it. Her eyes never changed; her smile grew slowly.

"You mean they're talking about me? Well, of course they would—a strange American woman."

Johnny murmured despairingly. If she knew what he was hinting at, that, in some way; her coming had to do with the murders, she was evading it. He wouldn't press it more. So he promised to fetch Yates' car after luncheon. But he knew a change had come over Mrs. Keith.

Two men who might have talked with her had died terribly. The cabby, and the sailor who knew orchids. Was this why she came?

AT LUNCHEON Yates and Aleshire suddenly ceased talking when Roney came to the table. The Britisher drew his long face longer, and explained they were through with murder except on its lighter side. As to the two beggars on Joe Chen's ice, that was a serious matter, and the Club committee should enter protest.

"You can drink hearty tomorrow, Aley, m' lad," said Yates. "The inspector is takin' them off for the buryin'."

"You and the honourable consul general will attend?"

"A funeral? Johnny and I are drivin' the American lady out through the back lands. Orchids, eh, Johnny?"

"Oh, yeah," said Johnny. His voice was strained. "Dick, let's eat and run. She's waiting—and people are coming to town in flocks for this damn burying. Look at the niggers, will you?"

Yates drove with him to Dowle's Hotel. Curiously enough, all Atengo turned out for the funerals of two obscure men who had no kin on the island; and of whom, curiously also, nothing was known as to their past lives. Somber black folks in their Sunday best trudged the roads. Bicycle constables dodged naked babies in the village dust. The parson came from Moretta Church, and grim faced planters rode in on sun faded horses to drink and grumble about Chen's store bar.

"Johnny," muttered Yates, "every blighter is goin' except us, and the three jailbirds on the beach. They were gambling for each other's shirts when we passed. Actin' nasty for the law and the parson to observe. Well, there's Mrs. Keith waitin' for us."

She came out smiling. A mile along the silent roads between the broad green choke of the bananas, she and Yates were bantering. Johnny Roney tried to join in, but it was feebly done.

The black wing of death hovered through the long warm, silent afternoon for Consul Johnny. A pleasant drive. They called at a plantation house or two, but the managers were in town. Yates pushed his ancient car into the few bits of wild growth left, and opened the gas a bit on the hard south sand beach. Then they showed up at Moretta and had tea with the parson's aged housekeeper. It was nearly five o'clock when Yates suddenly recalled that they'd forgotten all about orchids.

Mrs. Keith smiled, as she'd smiled all afternoon. Plainly she'd lost interest in orchids. Well, of course, Johnny knew about that, but he smiled along with them. A charming drive, and at dusk they came by the West Road to the Club.

Aleshire was on the seawall side in dinner dress. After the cocktails he resumed his sardonic recital of the day's events.

"Wonderful turnout, Mrs. Keith. Ancient buggies, bony nags, black folks strung along the road clear to the buryin' ground. Our honorable inspector ridin' in the resident's carriage and each cursin' the other under his breath. And why did the resident come to a cabby's funeral? I fancy to show the inspector how a murder mystery should be properly carried through.

"Then we had the parson, Johnny, m' lad, ridin' in state with Joe Chen in Chen's big new American car. Chen, I understand, financed the burials, to save

the two from the pauper's lot. But the hit of the jolly old show was the crew of the Canadian rum ship, down from the Bahamas because of the new export tax there. American fellas, whom Durlich had quizzed hard about his murders. To show how they took it they hired all the cabs in port, and filled old Dorgin's with flowers. Then they cheered the undertaker when the procession started. Jolly idea, Mrs. Keith, but Dorgin's horse balked on the lads. Five cheery loads of them, Johnny, with their legs hangin' out the sides of the carriages, bringin' up the rear. The fellas were about to give three cheers for the parson when Durlich admonished them. Is it really done that way in the States?"

"Rotten," growled Johnny. "Mrs. Keith, don't mind him."

But she laughed. It relieved some strain at least. Dusk was groping in from sea and land. The Club boy lighted a dim lamp here and there on the veranda, and there was the flit of a bat from the rafters. But that silence wrapped the town. The ragtag end of the double funeral was still about the rum shops, and there were more people on the waterside than usual at this hour. But that stealthy stillness was on them. On the beach back of Chen's the cooking fire of the three friendless men glinted fitfully.

And suddenly this brooding silence was broken by a shout from the dusty street. Men were running; first to Chen's store and then from it. They poured out, a frightened, screaming rabble. The white helmet of a constable shone under the store porch lamp. Durlich was there, gesticulating to one of his black policemen.

"What the devil?" murmured Yates, and went from the Club. He was back hurriedly, and his voice was oddly low. "Aleshire, better go on over. Merdank's killed. When Chen opened the store, just now, they found him. The post clerk—shot through the head. Man, what's the town coming to?"

"Three," whispered Johnny, and stared at Mrs. Keith. She was looking rigidly at him, and he hoped the other men didn't see her.

"Ha!" retorted Aleshire. "Another for Chen's ice house? I was hopin' the worst was over. You'll excuse us, Mrs. Keith? Positively indecent the way our people are cuttin' up since you arrived."

JOHNNY shoved back his chair to cover Mrs. Keith's silence. He muttered apologies himself, aimlessly, and took the American woman to her hotel. A straggling black panic parted before the car as it passed Chen's store. Men seemed frightened either to stay, or to slink back to their home huts in the tree choked dark lanes.

At Dowle's gate Mrs. Keith broke the silence between them.

"Mr. Roney, this last man killed was the post clerk, wasn't he?"

Johnny fidgeted at her cool directness.

"Yes. I was going to quiz him, and now I can't. But he wasn't murdered. They just said that it's suicide. Merdank stayed alone in Chen's store when Chen was at the funerals. Locked himself in the post cubby and put a gun to his head. Yates said the gun was in his hand."

"Then," said Mrs. Keith, breathless now, "they can't accuse any one—the beach men or any one—about Merdank, or Dorgin, or Coombs? Well, then—" she stopped, relapsing to her studied calm— "It's reasonable to conclude that Merdank killed the other two. Then shot himself because the guilt was too much for him to bear!"

Johnny stared at the utter relief in her voice. Then he stammered. Well, yes, it looked reasonable—certainly some connection. The three deaths were linked—three men were now silent . . .

Roney lifted heavy eyes to hers. Relief! Grasping at anything to avert suspicion from the three sea tramps! Were they her agents in some subtle vengeance which was her mission here? But, no, they could not have done the killings.

Jailed when Coombs was killed.

Johnny bade Mrs. Keith good night in some confusion. At the Club, Aleshire yawned over his port. Yates eyed Roney narrowly, for Johnny was still confused when he spoke, hardly realizing they were Mrs. Keith's words—

"Say, you birds, it looks like Merdank did for the two, eh?"

"Merdank?" Aleshire gazed blandly at him. "Oh, Johnny, m' lad! I found this while we poked in Merdank's waste box. A scrap, but the name on it—weren't you askin' about a chap named Keith?"

The vice-consul took the paper silently. A cheap white envelop across which was written "Edward H. Keith". The writing was oddly familiar. Was it like that upon the remittance letters that had been postmarked Atengo for eight years back, or the signature of Albert Keller on Durlich's document?

Johnny laughed constrainedly.

"Oh, yes—Keith! I was asking about a Keith—some old unfinished business of the office files. Let's see, now; was it Edward H?"

They knew he was lying. He went on jerkily.

"Found in Merdank's waste box, eh? Well, what of it? It might have been there weeks. I suppose he chucked a lot of scraps there."

Aleshire chuckled dryly.

"Oh, certainly. Any number of Keiths in the colonies could have written here on business. Well, a drink, eh?"

Johnny gulped it and excused himself. The two watched him cross the street and vanish up the consulate stairs.

"Do you think, Aley," asked Yates, "that the lad is short in his accounts, and his government has sent Mrs. Keith as a damned worrying investigator to look 'em over?"

The Britisher's cynical grin came.

"I thought of that. But of course here are our jolly little murders. Johnny knows a bit—and we shall stand by, m' lad. I can cable for a few hundred pounds."

Yates shook his head.

"Mustn't ask till he comes to us, fella."

In his office Roney was comparing three bits of writing. He sighed dispiritedly.

"Damn it all, alike but not the same." Then, on the last one, his finger smeared half dried ink. Then this name, Keith, had been written not hours ago, tossed aside by a frightened yellow man facing eternity! So was Mrs. Keith right—was Merdank the killer?

But Good God, she didn't believe it was Merdank; she *knew* it wasn't Merdank! Johnny had read that much in her eyes.

And the two grand loyal chaps there at the Club were guessing, but guessing wrong, that Johnny knew and would not speak. Aleshire drawled the matter when Yates left.

"Jolly old jam for an American consul, fella. Likely enough it's dope smugglin' or something of the sort. And Johnny's protectin' his lady from home. As to the murders, of course, that's impossible to explain. We shall spread Johnny's idea that Merdank did for the two."

Not that they believed it. But Durlich, the poor old amateur at crime detection, seized on the gossip relievedly. And all Atengo followed joyously. Merdank's suicide explained it all. Yates hurled a towel at Johnny as the two alternated under the bungalow shower the next morning.

"Wipe that glassy grin off your mug, Johnny. The thing is officially confirmed. Old Nanny, the Obeah witch doctor out Moretta way, has read chicken blood and announced Merdank was the killer. The government ought to pay for the chicken, what?"

Yates drove Johnny to port through the usual gold, calm morning. Just one ripple in the mirrored water toward the *palisadoes*—a lone fishing skiff, limp sailed, rowing in. Beyond, in the haze, was the black mark of Birge's derelict schooner hulk. Drunken beach men held revels on her, slept with faces up to the moon, and came to port with empty

fishing seines, secure from the vagrancy laws.

Business took the vice-consul to the wharf, and he stopped at Chen's store. Chen was explaining, in his correct English, to a shipping agent:

"Merdank, without doubt. Something's been on his mind for days. I am aiding the police to untangle his affairs —bad affairs, I fear."

Johnny broke in gruffly.

"But how did a scrawny chap like the post clerk swing a heavy *machete* to bash Dorgin and Coombs? Likely, eh?"

The shipping man eyed him curtly. He was upsetting a satisfactory conclusion; and then what business had the American consulate messing in?

Johnny realized that. He moved off, mopping his brow. What the devil had he spoken for? Absolutely none of his business. His only proper business was to get this American woman away—away from Atengo, quickly, by any desperate stratagem, before something else turned up. And she'd go; she was ready to go now; her orchids had bloomed in blood and sinister mystery, but she was satisfied, ready to go. Atengo would be glad when her ship hulled below the sea rim, but Atengo would never know why she had come. Nor Consul Johnny Roney.

At the door he was thinking how glad he would be not to know, when he heard Chen's soft slippers behind him. He turned to look straight into the Chinese' level, black, unfathomable eyes.

The merchant's courteous, faintly interested voice flowed.

"About your inquiry, sir—the man named Keith. I regret that you never had the chance to question Merdank about the letters. I asked him, but he knew nothing. Quite sure, he knew nothing."

"But the envelops were postmarked Atengo."

Chen shrugged at the American's sullen perplexity.

"Ah, that! A mysterious thing—but the post clerk is a suicide. And undoubtedly a murderer. But I'll take it up with the authorities, sir, only—"

Johnny grunted. He was on the porch when Chen called softly.

"I suppose the American lady will go home now?"

Johnny nodded. In his pocket he had that bit of white envelop with Edward Keith's name written on it, but he had a feeling that showing it to Chen would get nowhere. Not now, at least, and Johnny must keep Mrs. Keith's name out of it. Merdank had joined Dorgin and Coombs in the bond of silence. And she was satisfied. Queer, that!

And Chen was faintly smiling; he, too, was satisfied!

So was all Atengo, settling back to its dull stupor of heat and light, of robing green and empty sea. Merdank had given it its week of terror. Merdank had not explained, but he atoned.

JOHNNY joined Yates at luncheon. The trade wind was late, and the silent heat oppressed them both. No wind explained why the fishing skiff that had been all morning fetching in from the *palisados*, was just now beaching below Chen's store. Keller, the tall oarsman, lifted his crippled comrade and carried him to the palm shade by their beach hut. Landers, the little cockney, followed with their rotten seine. A snatch of ribald song came through the stinging wavers of the noontide sun. It was an insult to the port, to living men and dead—but aimed at the solemn black constable who stood stiff in his white tunic before the little red brick jail.

Or to Joe Chen, the trader, at his siesta in the back room of the big store. The heat weary men at the Club tables could hear it. Mrs. Keith, at Dowle's Hotel, could not escape it. At the hour when Atengo's tensed nerves sought peace three madmen on the burning sands taunted its loved silence.

"Durlich ought to settle that trash," grunted Yates. "The biggest disappointment of the inspector's life is that

he couldn't hang these murders on 'em. He's back country now, trying to question Merdank's people as to any possible motive for doing in Coombs and Dorgin. And he'll get nowhere, of course."

"Dick—" Johnny grinned—"think I'll chuck the job. This hole's been endurable with you two birds here, but never again."

"I've heard you say it before," chuckled Yates.

"Look at the place? Rusty iron fences built of hurricane roof scraps from long gone warehouses. Tangled with cactus about grass thatched huts. Water wallows for sleeping pigs. Buzzards drowsing over the sewer ditches. One block from the waterside, stink, heat, silence."

"Look the other way," replied Yates. "Clean blue water; palm curved, white sandy shores—and what a sky! Then here's the gang . . . But of course you ought to go away, Johnny, m' boy. No reason for you sticking. As for Lord Aleshire and myself—ah, there may be reasons . . . Well, time for gin, Johnny. Or rather late, I say. The Scotch and soda, steward."

Johnny did not answer. He'd been watching through the screen, and up the curve of shore, past the wharf and store. He saw Landers idling through the palm fringe to the road. Then he saw Mrs. Keith.

The fellow must have asked her for a shilling, for he now touched his cap, as she extended her hand, and turned away. Two minutes later Landers was slouching into Yanna's native rum shop. He came across the street, directly now, to join his comrades at the fish fry.

"What in hell does she do that for?" growled Johnny. "Stake 'em to a pint of rotten rum! Steam 'em up to more insulting antics."

Yates yawned. Life here was all open to sun and sky again, and death remote, uninteresting.

Johnny sulked in his office all afternoon over meager routine. He listened for Mrs. Keith's light step upon the consulate stairs, but for the first afternoon of her stay in port, she did not come. He went to the Club at four, had the usual drinks and drove homeward with Yates. But Johnny halted the car before Dowle's Hotel, a bit worried.

The house boy said that the American lady had gone for a walk.

"Fed up on the village—can't blame her," said Yates, but Johnny knew it was to cover his own nervous imaginings. So the car rattled home to the little bungalow on the ridge.

Johnny milled restlessly about the screens staring seaward. Half an hour later he phoned, and Yates, in the tub, heard his gasp of relief. The American lady had returned, Dowle assured Johnny. She was writing letters—any message?

"No," stammered Johnny. "Needn't say I called up, Dowle."

No use of Mrs. Keith knowing he was so on edge about her.

Yates was having gin and bitters at an indecently early hour the next morning when Aleshire sauntered to the Club bar.

"So Dicky's gettin' depraved," observed the Briton. "Quite."

"It's Johnny," said Yates. "Still hot and bothered. No peace for the lad. He's looking for more horrors to come."

"My dear fella—" Aleshire screwed his eye-piece tighter. "What's a few murders between friends? Our proper business is to see that Johnny enjoys his gin again. And so his lady must go—the first boat."

Above the shabby gallery of the consulate they saw Johnny milling restlessly about. Then Mrs. Keith swinging along the waterside walk and up the consulate stairs. The vice-consul had phoned her curtly.

He was going to have it out. Place this scrap of paper from the postoffice waste before her and demand that she explain. So he began grimly—and rushed fatally into the trap.

"Who wrote your husband's name there? It's *not* your husband's signature —look at the difference between it and

your remittance envelops—yet it's like. Mrs. Keith, you wrote it. You took it to Merdank—perhaps to refresh his memory about the others!"

The first puzzled look in her eyes cleared swiftly.

"Oh, yes, of course! I copied Ned's name and gave it to Merdank for comparison, as you say. What of it?"

"I don't believe you," said Johnny. He realized now that he himself had given her this plausible explanation. So he went on furiously, "You didn't write this. Neither did any Ned Keith. Keith wrote none of these envelops because there is no Keith—never was!"

Her calm eyes flickered an instant. Then she evaded:

"Only one thing is sure. Merdank lied when he said no letters were ever mailed to me from Atengo. He lied—"

"And died!"

Mrs. Keith smiled faintly.

"My dear boy, it's all puzzling."

"Is it—to you? You've seen every man here. I'm tired of repeating that there never was any Keith to send you money."

"Yes," she said quietly. "Not any more. So there's nothing to be done. Dowle says there's a freighter calling in Wednesday. I can take her to Panama, and then a ship home. I know you all want me to leave Atengo."

"Well—but three humble, poor men are dead because of you."

That hurt. She turned her eyes away. But she was not surprised. Certainly she might have expected this at last. But Johnny Roney felt oddly remorseful. He rattled the papers on his desk and stared out the window.

"Damn it all, Mrs. Keith. Let's cut all this for awhile. Aleshire suggested that you dine with us tonight at the Club. It would look a bit—better—"

She smiled again, but the guile was wanly grateful. "As if you three musketeers had taken me under your protection? As if I might die next?"

Johnny blinked solemnly. Twenty-four hours ago she had feared nothing, but he had feared for her. No one else was fearing now. Since Merdank, the book of death seemed closed. And she was going away, satisfied. But whose hand had struck for her—if that was it? A threat of hers had dogged Merdank to suicide, perhaps? But what of Dorgin and Coombs, two men whose past was unknown till they drifted to Atengo?

Roney liked this woman from home. He wouldn't believe she knew—and yet? Well, he wouldn't ask her any more. . .

Mrs. Keith arose from her cane chair.

"Well, I'll dine with you three tonight—if you really wish it. If anything hap—if I can't, I'll telephone you at the Club."

Then she was gone, and Johnny went to the Club for a drink and a bath. What could she mean?—if anything happened? What could prevent her from dining at the Club?

"I'll order champagne and knock these woggies out of my brain," he growled. "And if Aleshire starts his cursed humor about Joe Chen's ice, I'll bawl him out right before her."

Neither Yates nor the port officer were about, and he was glad. He drove Yates' car to fetch Mrs. Keith. She looked like a small town college girl when she tripped from Dowle's frowsy hall. A pink fluff of a dinner gown and gilt flashing slippers. But she was rather silent, and when Johnny took her to the Club veranda on the seaward side, he was conscious of a sepulchral silence from the tiny bar where his two friends awaited. They glimpsed the guest.

"That dolly has come to dance," drawled Aleshire. "Fancy—well, why not? Hi, Johnny-O, a cocktail and we'll all join up."

"Make it swift." Johnny gritted his teeth. "Now when we go to her, a little cheer, please. Do you realize how unnatural we're all actin'? Every one on the perishin' island, for that matter?"

"Since Mrs. Keith came to port—" Aleshire screwed in his eyepiece. "Do you know, I was readin' a bit today. High priestesses and sacrificial rites—

that sort of thing. It seems that when Cleopatra came to Karnak and registered, the proper thing was to throw all the maids and busboys to the crocodiles and get a new set. Now Mrs. Keith comes to Atengo, and we whack up three beggars for her—"

"Aleshire, you start that line and I—I—"

"We'll dine her and throw her to the sharks. She's a jinx, a Jonah. Oh, don't soil your ruby lips with curses, Johnny. If this thing keeps up no skipper will take her away. We'll have a new sort of beachcomber with us always. Do you think she murdered those chaps with her own fair hands? Wonderful woman, what?"

Johnny seethed and led the way to the seaward side. The breeze was down. The palm fronds unstirred by the veranda rail. Dusk and brooding stillness. That odd watching silence of sea and land.

THE table, set for four, had a bowl of frangipanni which Yates had remembered she liked. Think of good old Dick fetching the stiff, delicate blossoms and having them floating among ferns!

Aleshire eyed them quizzically; Yates had swiped them from the rum runners' tribute to old Dorgin, the cabby, without doubt.

"Hush," muttered Yates. "Johnny's hunting for his lady."

Mrs. Keith was not on the seawall veranda. Johnny was staring down to the narrow beach, and Aleshire yawned.

"Well, then, time for another cocktail at the bar. Lord love us, Johnny's ordered up the champagne service!" He nudged Dick and the two retired to the bar.

Roney went along the screens. Eastward, along the beach, he saw the wharf jutting from the warehouse piling. To the west the strip of sand curved to the low rocky ridge which ended it. A bit of jungle here, and then began the endless banana plantings. Seaward the shoals were mirrors of pink and gold under the sunset. A gray drift of night beyond, against which was the vague ripple of a boat slipping to the *palisados*.

Mrs. Keith was not on the land side of the veranda. Johnny went to the reception room, then the card room, and heard snatches of talk from the bar. Yates and Aleshire were idling with a steamship agent and a booted planter from out Moretta way.

"—Who'll handle the mail now Merdank kicked off? . . . "

Johnny circled the screens, and muttered to the waiting steward. Sam had seen the lady here, but when he returned she was gone. Johnny looked down from the three steps to the hard sand below the club wall.

Then he cursed slowly.

"Damn it, she's gone strolling again!"

He followed small heel prints hoping she had turned up past the rock ledge to the highway, and thence to the Club yard in front. Then halted where the footprints stopped. In the shallow water was the mark of a boat's keel. He looked seaward. There was a ripple in the dusk stealing from the east. The skiff could not be seen against the distant sandspit, but beyond this the coral shoals stretched to the last barrier.

After that was the murmur of the Caribbean, then the Atlantic, two thousand miles to Africa. Johnny found himself muttering with fatalistic prophecy:

"She got in that boat—dinner gown and gilt slippers. She expected to be summoned from Dowle's, but they took her from the beach here—out to Birge's wreck. Where else? *Who?*"

He went slowly back to the veranda. No use to hurry. This white woman walking through the mystery of red death in this black port was deliberate in all she did. Still Johnny was conscious that his hand was shaking when he lifted the cocktail awaiting him at the bar. He touched Yates' sleeve.

"Tell the steward dinner's off. Say that Mrs. Keith is ill—gone back to hotel."

Yates nodded silently. Aleshire's ascetic face thrust closer.

"In a mess, eh, Johnny? Well, don't tell the gang if you don't want to—not till you're ready."

"What a fool I've been not to! But Mrs. Keith is in a skiff heading out to the *palisados*. There's a cut through to the sea, and I've got to find out—an American citizen in trouble, you know."

Aleshire stiffened to the officer's keenness of Gallipoli and Ypres.

"Meet me at the customs wharf. I'll nip upstairs and get the perishin' old service arm. Johnny, m'lad, I've been too much the jester at the feast of death. Goin' to atone now, really."

He joined them at his launch, stripped his dinner jacket, and bent over the motor. No one spoke till the boat found the half tide through the sand cut and the first easy swell lifted it.

Aleshire throttled down when they glimpsed the ancient hulk on the coral ledges. Then shut the motor when he saw the tidal drift. He adjusted his dinner tie and unshipped an oar.

"Dicky, take the other. We'll nip in without any noise. The honorable consul-general will take the tiller. Now, pull a bit."

They toiled half a mile with the heavy launch. Aleshire's gasping whispers came.

"Years since Oxford—no end out of trainin'—no woman's worth it, but Johnny—which way, now?"

"Heavy on the port oar. You birds are cutting circles."

They pulled mightily in the ebb, and so doing, dragged near the schooner's stern. She was down by the head. Yates put a hand up to a rusty rudder chain, and Aleshire's white cuff came softly against the barnacle crusted planks. Then he whispered.

"Dim light through that starboard port, Johnny. Well, question what to do? King's waters, and an American affair—and a woman."

"If she's been kidnapped, why doesn't she call for help?" said Yates. "Not a sound from forward."

"They call for help only on their solicitors' advice," retorted Aleshire. "That's why I left London. Well, Johnny, shall we stand to, here in the boat? You don't want to embarrass her, of course."

The vice-consul was getting a leg up to the shattered rail. Then he whispered back:

"Yes, let me handle it. If a row starts—"

"I shall come up and be nasty," retorted Aleshire. "Dick, are you a Yank—and a man?"

"Once—and coming back. Johnny gave me a relapse."

Johnny Roney stood on a storm stripped after-deck. The young moon's glimmer showed the stump of a mast forward, and a roofless deckhouse. But from the aft companion a dim light glowed upward. He turned that way with rising anger, for he heard Mrs. Keith's voice. And she was in no danger; her words came softly, gently, persuasive.

"You must give up this idea of revenge—you must go away."

A man's voice blurred in a shouted refusal. He could not make out whose, for suddenly a sound behind Johnny made him turn. Forward of the mainmast stump a man's figure had come into the dim moonlight, and the gasping cry had come from another bound to some rusted gear near the forecastle hatch. The first man had done something—twisted an arm, tightened a rope, and the prisoner moaned through gagged lips.

Johnny slipped along the starboard side of the wrecked midships house. From a corner, unseen, he recognized the others. Birge, the taciturn skipper of the *Ruata*, stepped back from the writhing form of Landers, the beach bum. The gag now merely muffled the cockney's tortured defiance.

"Sure, I brought 'er! It's 'er right to know everythink!"

"You'll never do another job for him,"

growled Birge. "Never no more. You wouldn't mind my words, so here goes—"

He crouched in on the bound man and did something. But at the other's cry, Johnny Roney rushed. This affair was torture. Birge looked up, whirled about, and steel gleamed as Johnny struck him. The seaman's knife clattered as the two locked and lunged to the broken rail.

Johnny had no breath, and Birge fought silently, with sledging fists. The American stepped in, shoving, smashing with the fury of youth, and suddenly the master of the *Ruata* toppled. Back and down till he struck the water with a soft plop. Johnny followed along the rail.

A hand came out, then another—then merely bubbles in the tide. Johnny turned forward, gasping.

"Well, he tried to knife me. Damn him, let him go."

He went around the house and twisted the cloth and block from Lander's mouth. The cockney stared, jerked his head feebly about.

"The consul, yus! Look sharp for Chen aft! 'E must 'ave 'eard!"

"Chen!" Johnny stared, then dragged at Landers' bonds.

"Look sharp. They brought dynamite —Birge an' Chen. They'll blow the bloomin' 'ulk to 'ide their work, an' say Keller an' us did it. Yus. Now, Gawd 'elpin' me, I'll put a knife to 'im yet!"

"Wait," whispered Johnny. "Birge? Chen? Whose ship was this?"

"Keller's. Birge drowned men on 'er, locked under 'atches—'im an' 'is yeller boss. Keller—they done 'im in by now, like as not." Landers' thin face was growing blank; he gasped on drowsily. "Yus, I brought the Hamerican woman. She awsks me so I rows in beyond the Club. Chen won't dare no tricks with 'er, I thinks—but 'e did!"

Landers' beaten senses faded. Johnny arose, stole aft. At the companion he saw a dim light below and swung softly down the broken stairs. The battle forward evidently had not been heard. But Chen!

RONEY turned from a passage into the first empty room. Flickers of light came through shattered wall panels, and by them he saw the master's cabin. In a doorway across it stood Joe Chen, listening but not alarmed. Each of his hands was thrust into the other sleeve, and in one, at least, was grasped a pistol. The merchant was watching two people who sat across from one another at a rough table. One was Mrs. Keith, who occasioned no surprise to Roney, but the other made him gasp.

Albert Keller, the unshaven, shock-headed renegade of Atengo beach, was raising his voice in victorious insolence.

"You didn't expect her to come, did you, Chen? Nor I, either. That was Landers' game. So, what now, Chen—what now?"

"What I said," answered Chen in his toneless calm. "Pretty soon you will agree. You must agree, so I am glad the lady came."

"The hell you are!" snarled Keller. "Shoot if you mean that!"

Mrs. Keith stirred, sighed, as if at fatal stubborness in the man.

Chen's voice came as if from a machine unmoved by human wrath.

"No wish to shoot, my friend. You just go away, silent—forever. But how can I be sure of that?"

Keller laughed harshly.

"That's right! You can't be sure. I'd come back, Chen. I'd rot with this ship of mine, but I'd drag you down in the end. I'd have killed you four months ago when I found you here on Atengo, but first I had to make you pay for all you robbed me of."

Mrs. Keith's glance went from Keller's desperate, baffled eyes to Chen's impassive ones. Then she leaned to the renegade white man.

"Ned, take his terms. Then we'll go away."

"Ned," whispered Johnny Roney in the dark of the mate's room. "Ned Keith—her husband! Keller was *Keith*

—and she knew it when she saw him on the beach! But then—who killed Dorgin and Coombs?"

The sea tramp had drowned Johnny's mutter with curses roared at Chen. But the trader's gun shifted slightly in his sleeve, and the other man laughed bitterly as he turned to Mrs. Keith.

"Terms, Alma? Make terms with a rat? He's killed—he'll kill—"

"If he wanted to kill you, why didn't he do it before I came?"

"What for? He knew I daren't make charges against him. I had no more proof now than I did eight years ago, that Chen and Birge robbed me, sank my schooner at Trinidad—and then framed the job on me. They thought they'd see me hanged, but I drew life. Eight years of the prison rock gang, and I escaped. Learned the truth about my schooner then, and came to Atengo to find you, eh, Chen?"

He leaned across the table, at times speaking in cold calm, then shaken with futile fury.

"Found you, and could do nothing. A word that I was Keith, once master of the arms runner *Sea Belle*—that's what this hulk was, Alma, before Birge got her—and I'd go back to the colony breakwater. Chen could do it—the old murder charge still hung over me. So Chen waited, watching me."

Chen could wait with Birge on guard above—but Johnny Roney had heaved Birge to the sharks. So the Chinese shrugged patiently.

"That is true. I did not fear you, Captain Keith. Not yet—"

"Until you came, Alma." Keith spoke to her but his eyes did not leave Chen's own. "Then he struck down the two men who were the last ones that could have told the truth—Coombs and old Dorgin. He'd have done me in then but my two pals watched against any more murdering in the dark. Chen had waited too long, just as I'd done. I was trying to win Coombs over to tell the truth—to you, Alma. So Chen put the *machete* to him, just as he did Dorgin when he feared Dorgin would drop some hint to you."

"I guessed Chen was at the bottom of the killings even before Landers came to my room in the dark and warned me."

"I sent Landers to you. To tell that you must go away. I knew you'd recognized me, and if you'd told that damned consul, I'd have gone back to prison. You understand, Alma?"

She nodded.

"That much, yes. You ordered me to go, and I was going—but I asked Landers to bring me out here tonight for a last appeal to you, Ned. Oh, give it all up! Hatred, revenge—your lost years!"

Keith did not look at her. There seemed madness in the glitter of his eyes fixed always on Joe Chen. But he spoke for her ears.

"Revenge? Hardly that—does a man want revenge on a rat? Listen: I never knew the real truth till I escaped from the colony prison and found little Landers at Dominica. Landers had pieced the facts from one man or another about the port rum shops of what happened to me. Chen was supercargo, and Birge the mate on this schooner which I had running arms into Venezuela for Don Lopez.

"That was the reason why I left you without explanation, Alma, nine years ago. Well, I'd brought seventy thousand dollars gold into Trinidad from the trip, and Birge and Chen stole it from the ship's safe. Then they got seven of the crew to mutiny. Dorgin was one of 'em, Coombs another. The only men of the gang left alive who could inform on Chen."

Mrs. Keith's resolute eyes seemed calming his recital. That was what Johnny Roney saw from his hiding place. The three talking quietly of death, revenge and hatred—and Joe Chen was the calmest of them all. But Chen held the gun. . .

"So then," put in Ned Keith's wife, "Chen killed them."

Chen bowed his head slightly and

Keith's rugged face cracked with a grin.

"Easy. Chen took a new *machete* from his store stock and met each man in the dark. They'd not expect a thing till the cane knife split to their skulls. Then Chen cleaned the *machete* and put it back in his cases. He went in and out the back way from his store. No one would suspect him. Easy as that, eh, Chen?"

Chen's eyes glittered but he said nothing.

Keith tapped out his pipe.

"For years Coombs and Dorgin had blackmailed Chen in petty ways. Rum and credit and some cash. But when you came, Coombs thought you were a rich American woman and he might tell you something to his profit. That this was my schooner, and that Chen and Birge sank her when a British patrol boat was about to inquire into the row on board. Mutiny, you see—after they'd robbed me. They scuttled her with sleeping men on her, and got the rest of the crew to swear I did it. To cover murder I'd done on her! Nine men swore against me, but one judge of the high court had a doubt—so I didn't hang. That was bad, eh, Chen?"

Still Chen merely watched gravely. Captain Keith went on:

"So, after I went up for life, Birge raised the schooner on a salvage deal. I'd guess he got rid of the drowned men's bones on her with no outside talk about them. He and Chen outfitted the ship but she was Birge's jinx. He lost her in a gale, and she drifted in a hulk to this reef. Birge had to see her every time he took the *Ruata* in and out, trading for Chen. But no ghosts bothered Chen; he was the honest citizen now, Santa Claus to the niggers and moneylender to the whites. The rich man of Atengo—Chen!"

Mrs. Keith broke in on the sneering voice:

"I know now. Chen sent me the remittances after you went to prison. I was fooled till I came to Atengo and saw that poor frightened post clerk."

"YES, Merdank had forged my writing to all the envelops," Keith went on. "Chen had read all our letters on the schooner when he robbed her. He knew we'd quarreled. Knew I'd promised to send you money. So he sent it, fearing you might start some sort of investigation if it failed to come. Then he feared to stop, so Merdank mailed you the notes each month. But when I came to Atengo, Merdank lost his nerve. He stuck the money in his pocket. Then you arrived, Alma, and went to the consulate. The post clerk knew he couldn't explain to the government, and Chen was hounding him hard. So the poor devil gunned himself as the best way out. And Chen smiled; he could put the whole mystery on a dead man, and hang the two murders on him as well. Chen had the luck, I'll say!"

Captain Keith's wife had grown very still as she watched Chen. Johnny Roney saw that the Chinaman was growing uneasy beneath the woman's stare. Then she arose and came around the table to the gaunt renegade.

"Oh, Ned, let's go away. Back home British law can't touch you, and you can clear your name of those old charges. Let's forget."

Keith looked up wistfully when she touched his hand. He could jeer the constables and sneer to Chen's eyes, but this woman was something that drink, despair and black men's beaches had not burned from his memory. Yet revenge glowed white hot in him—Chen saw that. Chen stirred as if tiring of talk.

"You will not promise, so you will die here. Your lost ship will be your wife's grave also, Captain Keith. Yes, I waited too long. You have made too much trouble."

There was silence. Then Keith's grim voice:

"Your trump card, eh, Chen? You followed her here—more murders due, is that it?"

Johnny saw Chen's eyes narrow. Perhaps that was on his mind. He was

playing with these two and would destroy them in the end. Chen must stop every mouth that might destroy him. Birge had brought the explosive; there would merely be another mysterious tragedy for Atengo. No explanation except that the beach renegades had kidnapped the American woman and, somehow or other, blown up the hulk.

So Roney edged nearer the door. He'd have to get back to his friends. Aleshire had the only weapon. Chen might kill the two in the cabin before intervention could come.

The vice-consul had reached the stairs by the fore companion when Chen saw his shadow in the passage. Faint moonlight streamed down on a stealthy figure. Chen turned his head slightly—Birge would not be moving in this fashion. So Chen stepped aside for a better view. His eyes widened suspiciously at a creak of the stairs.

Then Roney heard a shot, the crash of wood and rushing feet. He turned and dashed for the cabin.

The table was overturned, and Mrs. Keith was just snatching the lamp as it fell. But Keith was upon the Chinese. Chen was backed to the wall shooting, so close to his enemy that the gun bursts were muffled between their struggling bodies.

Mrs. Keith turned a wild face to the door.

"Roney!" she cried out bitterly. "It's too late!"

But she stood holding the lamp above her shoulder, watching the fight. Hurrying footsteps came above. Yates and Aleshire were down the steps, crowding behind Johnny in the passage. The three saw Keith's great bony hands at Chen's neck, and Chen was firing his last shot with the gun crumpled aside from Keith's smoking shirt.

The Atengo beach derelict lifted Chen, swung him, hammered his head against the wall. His sun bleached hair glinted in the light, but he did not speak.

Aleshire first found his voice. He was eyeing the battle critically.

"Keller, eh? A bit of blood, but wild shootin', m'lads. And Chen—I imagine there's a good reason for all this."

"Keep away!" yelled Johnny. "I know the reason. Let him be!"

Chen had twisted free and was howling as he hammered the empty gun on the other man's naked shoulders. And Keith laughed; terrible, measured laughter, as if, at last, he had all the time he wished. Then, with implacable quietness, he closed in again.

The Chinaman dashed for the after passage. Keith followed with the sure stealthy interest which a cat has in playing with a mouse. Chen was half up the stairs when Keith locked on him. There came howls and gaspings—then steady feet ascending to the deck.

Yates and Roney turned forward and dashed to the other companion. Mrs. Keith took one faltering step that way, and Aleshire came to her with his detached smile.

"Dear lady, why not put down the bally old lamp? Fire, you know, if you dropped it." He took it from her, set it on the floor.

They heard struggling feet above, and Mrs. Keith moved on. Aleshire took her arm gently.

"Let's wait a bit. The thing up there—not quite so good for a woman, perhaps. The representative of the American government says it's quite all right. And of course Johnny knows."

"Ned," she whispered and listened to the sounds above. But Aleshire wouldn't let her go. Still his smile was rare comfort.

"I'd like to see the priceless battlin', but I mustn't. Represent the jolly old Empire, and it asks a chap such silly questions sometime. I'd rather not know too much, if you don't mind."

Then, presently, there came a slight splash on the port side, and receding footsteps. Aleshire patted Mrs. Keith's cold hand.

"Well, now, we might go up. Shouldn't wonder if things aren't all tidied. Of course, you feel a bit faint; I did myself

after Gallipoli. The wretched old war left me rather a shock for years."

HE KEPT on this gentle patter when they reached the deck. If Aleshire hated women he was adept in concealing it. They came to Roney and Yates near the broken wheel casing, and Keith stood by the port rail. The three were looking down at the purling tide past the schooner's stern. The young moon made light enough so that when a shapeless bundle writhed once under a dance of bubbles they all saw it. Yates pointed aft.

"There's a fin comin'—there's two. Well, Chen won't feel the wolves. Keller broke him fair in two before he chucked him. I heard his neck snap—Oh, pardon, Mrs. Keith."

Mrs. Keith hurried from Aleshire to the tall man whose yellow hair glinted in the moonlight as he tossed it from his eyes. But the gang saw his face when the woman touched his bare arm.

Aleshire pushed Yates around.

"Why not stroll forward? I've a nip in the old flask, Johnny, but I understand you Yanks never touch it in public. However, I'll save three drinks for Keller."

"He's not Keller," whispered Johnny. "Keith—Captain Ned Keith. Come on, you birds, I'll tell you. This was his ship. And that's his wife, get me?"

"I trust it's his wife, the way the chap's gathered her in," drawled Aleshire. "And she came to Atengo for him, did she? Johnny, you blisterin' fool, you've worried us for a week. Why couldn't you tell us?"

The three groped past the broken foremast, and there Landers sat, staring at them foolishly. Johnny went to him, then called back.

"Bring your brandy this way, Aleshire, Landers being a British subject. Landers, buck up. Your pal breezed through at last!"

"Chen gone?" gasped the cockney, and then fell to talking wildly.

Johnny intervened and went on explaining. Yates muttered astonishment; but Aleshire suddenly shut up the discussion.

"We'll go ashore now. Landers, my man, are you able to fetch Chen's launch astern and make fast to mine? There'll have to be some sort of official inquiry and questions answered, but never mind 'em now." He tugged Johnny's sleeve. "All bally rot, of course. And let's hop aft. We may be useful to Mrs. Keith in our poor fashion."

"Now, you birds," said Johnny, "don't try to be funny. She's crying. After all the superb nerve she had, she's crying."

The birds were very decent about it. They halted and Aleshire coughed to let the man and woman know they were coming. But Aleshire quite ignored Mrs. Keith. He went straight to the gaunt beach man with more briskness than Johnny Roney'd ever seen in him.

"I say, old fella, we're off now. I'm a long legged beast, so I think I've clothes at the Club that'll fit you out till steamer day. You're goin' home, you know. Oh, yes! I'm port officer, and I'll see you're deported if you hesitate. But first you and Mrs. Keith are dining with Yates and Roney and myself. At the Club, tomorrow night."

Keith stared at him coldly. There was a flare of the old savage spirit. Then it broke, and with it his voice through the dying lust for vengeance after his lost years.

"See here—" he muttered. "You'll have to know something first. I'm an escaped man—out of one of your damned colony prisons."

The Englishman gazed blankly at the sea.

"Oh, what did you say? Old chap, I'm a bit deaf. Didn't hear you, did you, Yates?"

Yates chuckled.

"Not a word. Did you, Roney?"

"Not a thing," said Johnny, "except—"

"No exceptions, absolutely. Captain

Keith, no man on Atengo knows where you came from, except three deaf men here before you."

"We don't even know your name," added Yates. "You're Keller until the next fruit ship drops her hook and you're on board."

Aleshire screwed in his eyepiece.

"You'll be under the American flag, then—and I don't see what our jolly old Empire can do about it. In the meantime a man named Keller is under detention of some sort by the American consulate. Charged with wife desertion, eh, Johnny?"

Mrs. Keith laughed slowly, then checked it. But a grim smile lighted the shadows of Ned Keith's rugged face. He patted her hand and said nothing. Vice-Consul Roney concluded he should be official.

"You're going home, Captain Keith. No argument. If anything can be done to restore your lost property it'll be taken up through Washington—after you're back in the States where there's nothing to be said about that—er—prison escape."

"Deaf again," put in Aleshire. "Struck from the record, Johnny. Oh, Landers, fetch that boat about!"

"Landers!" Captain Keith started. "Is he living? Thought Birge had done him in." He was hastening to his crippled pal at the rail.

Johnny turned to Mrs. Keith.

"Now that last bit of paper with your husband's name on it—Merdank must have practised his forging again just before he shot himself. So the only real handwriting of Ned Keith's is that name 'Albert Keller', signed to Durlich's form. Why didn't you recognize it from the others?"

"I did." Mrs. Keith smiled. "And lied to you. I was fooled by all the others until Merdank died. Then I guessed; didn't you?"

"I wasn't sure of anything," said Johnny. "You see, I—"

Aleshire broke in hurriedly. No use having her realize how Johnny had worried about her, suspected her, tried to protect her.

"Dear lady, the boy has been off his drink for days. Talked of resignin' and all that rot. Yates and I were gettin' ready to be severe with you. Chuck you out on a tanker as an undesirable. Fact, really."

She laughed again as they moved to the rail. Captain Keith was watching Landers shove the launch alongside. Landers looked up and touched his cap with a covert grin—and it was not to the port officer.

The gaunt man turned around to face the others.

"Aleshire, another thing: Landers and that crippled lad from Cayman stood by when it was dangerous to be a friend of mine. Chen would have done me in if the chance had ever offered. But the two were a bodyguard. They hardly let me out of their sight. So I'm standing by them—going to do something for them when I get away. But the two might get in some trouble with your government if—if anything were uncovered about their past."

Aleshire chuckled dryly.

"Positively, I'm deaf again. What was that about one's past? My dear fella, that's why I left London. So we didn't hear you, did we, Johnny?"

"Not a word," said Johnny Roney. "Hop to the boat, you birds."

Then Captain Keith laughed. He lifted his tired eyes to the moon and laughed again while the three birds were aiding his wife down to the boat. Then followed to her side.

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

IN connection with his story, "Guest of Honor", beginning in this issue, Georges Surdez sends in the following note giving the fact basis of some of its dramatic chapters:

Brooklyn, New York

Those familiar with the episodes of the Riff Campaign of 1925-26 will know that in describing the Legion detachment's attempt to save the garrison of El Ayas, I followed the general lines of the real expedition on the Post of Mediouna. I met one of the few survivors—there were four of them—and he consented, at the request of a mutual friend, to try to relate what had occurred after the thirty-odd picked men followed their four officers and were lost to sight.

I obtained a bizarre and disconnected tale, much as if the chap had been on a fast train and described things seen when he took an occasional glance out of the window. This incoherence, impossible to translate in writing, gave me a sense of nightmare drama. Woven into the Legionnaire's story were the chatterings of the hysterical negro, which he imitated with what seemed to me absolute accuracy.

This man concluded, "Name the officers, eh? They were aces, real officers!" I promised I would. Which made it rather impossible to base a story on the actual facts, in which I would have been compelled to use fictitious names. That is, until I had carried out my agreement. So here is the real story, based on his relation, and on several official and semi-official accounts. With the *real* names.

THE situation of Mediouna was that of El Ayas in the story. An effort had to be made to save the loyal defenders—and obviously, the

Legion was asked to do it. Major Cabazan, commanding the Sixth Battalion of the First Foreign Regiment of Infantry, was instructed to ask for volunteers, men and officers, in his companies.

As he expected, the entire battalion answered the call, and the choice was left to him. He selected thirty-two Legionnaires among those whose behavior had given them *the right* to go. And he appointed Lieutenant Guyon to command them, with Lieutenant Fain as his second. A friend of the two, Lieutenant Beulaygues, begged to be allowed to accompany them. Cabazan consented after a long argument.

THE whole battalion escorted the *lucky* few part of the way. When the time came to separate, confusion arose because Legionnaires not selected were trying to go with their comrades! The list of volunteers had to be checked off on the spot. Privates and non-coms were unsuccessful, but a lieutenant, for long a close friend of the other three officers, contrived to duck the watchful major, and left—a stowaway on that march to certain death. His name was Wable.

Lieutenant Guyon, according to records, executed his strict orders. He succeeded in getting the garrison free of the Post. Thousands of warriors surrounded them, and the combat lasted but a few brief minutes. Guyon, Fain, Beulaygues, Wable and Bouscatier, garrison commander, were killed. With them died nine Senegalese and twenty-eight Legionnaires. How many men from the Riff and rebel tribes fell in wiping them out, no one knows. A Waoura, who took part in the engagement on the native side, told me "three times sixty"—which he probably did not mean as a precise figure but as an indication that there had been more than a few. He could not inform me whether the natives had known of the detachment's coming in advance. He had been awakened and told that he must go and fight. And he had gone and fought.

THE officer who blew himself up with the attackers was Pol Lapeyre, twenty years old! His last message was: "We'll stick to the end."

The Post was that of Beni-Derkoul. If the Legion is famed among North African troops for its courage, it is not because they lack competition. The black soldiers composing the garrisons of the blockhouses showed themselves worthy of their fathers, who conquered the Sudan for France against Samory, Tieba, Ahmadou, Rabat Zobeir and the others. They showed the same solid affection for their white officers as did the blacks who followed Gouraud, Mangin, Baratier, Marchand in Senegal, Sudan, Chad, Wadai and Mauritania.

To them, loyalty is deemed due to their immediate white chiefs. The corporals commanding outposts, independent of supervision, surrounded by enemies, did not refuse bribes or laugh at threats because of France or an abstract ideal, but because "the lieutenant would be awfully sore." There were Tirailleurs who fought like maniacs when swayed by hysteria—and others who fell with Spartan simplicity.

This is written also according to the wishes of some Legionnaires: "Say, look into the things the Senegalese did, and tell people about them. And be sure to mention the Sixth Tirailleurs, eh?"

Which is done—as promised.

—GEORGES SURDEZ

AN Argentine comrade helps us out on a question of etymology:

Buenos Aires, Argentina

In the June 1931 number I notice that F. L. Wilson inquires about the origin of a greeting which he has heard as "abool, abool". As it happens to be easy to answer, here goes:

The word Mr. Wilson has misheard as "abool" is the Spanish "abur" which means adieu, farewell or goodby. Also spelled "agur". Pronounced by fairly illiterate people who have learned it by hearsay, it is not surprising that it should sound like "abool" for the "u" in Spanish has just that sound of "oo" and the final "r" is very easily slurred off into an "l".

"Abur" is used very commonly in northern Spain, and when one goes along the roads, whether known or not, he is greeted with a very pleasant "abur". Inasmuch as the peoples of northern Spain predominated in the colonization of America, it is not surprising that this should have made general the use of this particular word, which may be found in any dictionary and is, of course, perfectly proper Spanish. I can not conceive its ever having meant "go to the devil" or "go to hell", as Mr. Wilson seems to have heard.

—L. TUERO

A NOTE on four-decked men-of-war:

Wollaston, Massachusetts

I notice in Ask Adventure, Aug. 15th number, that Lieut. F. V. Greene states that there is no mention of 4-deckers in naval records. There is some question as to this, as the Spanish 130-gun ship, *Santisima-Trinidad* was a flush deck, 4-decked ship in 1805. This vessel was built for a 3-decker at Havana, Cuba, some years previous. A 3-decker of 1800 had 3 complete armed decks, and an armed quarter-deck and forecastle. The quarter-deck and forecastle were connected by gangways, one on each side, and some light carronnades were often placed there. However, the *Santisima-Trinidad* had her gangways filled in to make a flush deck, and a small armament placed there, in place of the gangway guns. So, in 1805, she became a real 4-decked ship, though not much more powerful than she had been as a 3-

decker, as there were but 12 light guns added, I believe.

I haven't the page and paragraph, but it can be found in James' "Naval History", probably in Vol. II or III.

As far as freeboard went, all these 3-deckers, with few exceptions, appeared to have 4 complete decks. The only thing that made them 3-deckers was the fact that the space between the gangways on the side and the quarter-deck and forecastle was open, like a rather large hatch amidships, in the uppermost deck. This was rather technical in viewpoint, as there is no question but what the vessel presented a pretty complete row of guns. I think this feature came in about 1780, but this date is only approximate.

—H. I. CHAPELLE

FREDERICK J. JACKSON, of our Writers' Brigade, holds a bit of discourse on rattlers, and ranch life in general:

Dos Rios, California

At the slightest discouragement from you I'm liable to try to debunk a lot of stuff about rattlesnakes. For 30 years, for instance, I have tried to make a rattler (every rattler I meet when I have a gun) line up the gun sight with his own eyes. I have tried this many more than 100 times, at various ranges—12 inches to 12 feet (from the gun muzzle)—and with one exception I have never been able to shoot a snake in the head without doing the aiming myself. And I firmly think that the exception was an accident. Less than a week ago, a rattler actually came *at* me. I had heard of this sort of thing but did not believe it; invariably the snake has desired nothing more than to escape.

When we removed last fall, some snakes moved in. The hot weather brought them out, and we have been stepping warily in the yard. Got two within twenty feet of the house within a week. Last summer was nearly a blank on snakes—possibly a dozen killed here on the ranch. This summer, however, threatens or promises to be interesting. I don't even dare pick up a piece of wood from a pile now without watching what I'm doing.

DEER, panthers, brush fires of mysterious origin, my being thrown into a fence when I forked my wife's pet horse bareback, the shooting of ground squirrels, wood rats, blue jays and other pests all help to keep life from being monotonous here. My own pet horse used to be a professional rodeo bucker under the name of Dead Easy. Thirteen months ago she tore about half of my scalp off by dumping me down a mountain side. Most of my pants and a lot of hide also got torn off. This year, after running wild on the range for nine months (including last Winter) she was plumb tame and friendly and glad to see me again. It's really funny how when I cut loose with a loud whistle to attract the attention of a visiting friend in a cottage a hundred yards down the mountain, this mare answers with a shrill bugle call and comes trotting up as close to the house as the fences will permit. She's a real pet horse, a cat-footed, mountain climbing horse. Forgive my enthusiasm, but I'm kinda crazy about that long legged, strong lunged mare. You'd be equally that way if you ever took a mountain ride on her. She once carried a 240-lb. man all day over the hills, after he had looked at her and opined that she couldn't carry him for an hour.

—F. J. JACKSON

A CLIPPING from the Seattle *Times* which ought to please old sea-dogs, and all others of you who have any sentimental feeling for the ships of another day:

Two romantic old sailing ships, units of Seattle's idle fleet of windjammers which have known the freedom of overseas routes, were saved today from being made prisoners in Lake Union by the new Aurora Street bridge, now nearing completion.

Robert Acheson, Seattle district manager for the Nelson Steamship Company, owner of the ships, during a trip around the lake measured with his eye the towering masts of the barks Moshulu and Monongahela and the height of the central span of the bridge.

He was sure the structure would make them prisoners, but verified his estimates by facts and figures from shipping records and city engineer's department. He found the height of the masts of the two ships was 190 feet and the central span clearance of the bridge 135 feet above the level of the lake.

Only a small gap in the bridge remained, so Mr. Acheson immediately ordered tugs and began moving the ships. The Moshulu was towed out of the lake this forenoon and this afternoon the Monongahela was moved. The vessels will be taken to Eagle Harbor.

The tugs Wilson, Forest T. Crosby and Wasp of the Washington Tug & Barge Company towed the two ships out of the lake. The vessels were taken to the Lake Washington Canal Locks and made ready for their trip across the Sound.

Mr. Acheson said the two ships are of steel and it would be impossible to take down their topmasts to allow them to pass under the bridge.

It will be possible to remove topmasts of the Monitor, Thistle and Fort Laramie and to take them out of the lake when the bridge is completed. All five of the sailing vessels are owned by the Nelson Steamship Company.

Ask Adventure

For free information and services you can't get elsewhere

Fishing

SOMETHING new—catching a pompano with a hook and line.

Request:—"Ozark Ripley has referred me to you on a matter of information about fishing for pompano. I want to surf fish for pompano on the Carolina coast. I want to know the proper baits to use and the proper tackle. I am a fresh water fisherman just getting into the salt water game."

—C. E. GREGORY, Morganton, North Carolina

Reply, by Mr. Hapsburg Liebe:—I'm fifty years old and have fished more than anybody else I know, am on the experimental staffs of three large fishing-tackle companies, and have never caught a pompano on a hook or seen one caught thus. I've always understood they were caught only in nets. But I have not fished off the coast of either of the Carolinas.

For bait, try sea fleas (called also moth crabs); they are commonly about the size of a joint of your little finger; are a dull white, and have no pincers; are found, when they are found, in the edge of the surf in the sand; can dig in like magic; to catch them, stir the sand with your feet and seine with a small seine. Try also soft shelled crabs in pieces of a size to fit a 4/0 or 5/0 hook. If no soft crabs are to be had, try hard crabs after having removed the back and legs. Try shrimp, the freshest you can get. Try hermit crabs, or even clams.

A 4/0 or 5/0 hook would about fit the pompano I've seen on the market. I wouldn't use a line heavier than 12-thread (linen; 24-lbs. breaking strength) unless I was halfway sure of hooking a channel bass or some other big fish. You will need 100 yards of this line, if you must make long casts, in order to have line for playing a possible big fish. A reel, of course, large enough to carry the line comfortably. And a rod that is long enough to make whatever cast you must make. I recommend a heart shaped sinker of 2 to 4 ounces in weight, with a hole through it for the line. The flat shape keeps the sinker from rolling, you know. The fish pulls the line through the hole, without dragging the lead, which often causes fish to drop the bait.

I'm sorry to be unable to give you more information about pompano, but I just haven't got it.

Sumatra

TOOTHACHE in the Dutch tropics may be more welcome than an American dentist's bill.

Request:—"I am a dentist who has become intensely interested in Sumatra through a friend and would like to know the possibilities of my profession there."

—ROSS D. HOUGH, Indianapolis, Indiana

Reply, by Capt. R. W. van Raven de Sturler:—Although dentistry is not an "outdoor activity" and I have no official information whatsoever on the subject I should imagine, from my own experiences in the greater and lesser Sunda Islands and India, that you would not be able to make dentistry pay a good profit in Sumatra; the few towns in existence, worthy of the name, have but very few white inhabitants, mostly government officials and heads of trading enterprises, and the fees you are used to collecting in the U.S. would seem a young fortune to Sumatra's whites, while the natives bear the pain or have some native practitioner for a few cents torture them more or less successfully by his own meth-

ods. Also medical and dental treatment is extended at small or no cost whatsoever by the military resident physician and dentist appointed by the Dutch government.

Polecat

HERE is a touchy outdoor problem —how to remove a skunk from the premises without accident.

Request:—"I have a summer place on a lake in the woods here in Montana. The cabins are built of logs which are set on heavy posts raised a foot or so above the ground. We have always lived in peace with numbers of squirrels, chipmunks, etc., and, as a matter of fact, have encouraged their presence by feeding and taming them. Recently, an old skunk and a family of five half grown little ones have moved under the cabins and have made their presence very definitely known. They seem quite without fear and hold evening parades within ten feet or so of ten or a dozen people. They make life miserable for the pet squirrels and birds and I want to get rid of them without disastrous results to the cabins. If there is a poison that would send them to water away from the cabins I would appreciate any information you could give me as to what it is and how to use it. Naturally I do not want to poison any of the small pets and thought that a poison in meat would get the skunks and not the squirrels and chipmunks.

I would not object particularly to the skunks if they would stay at home nights, but I am afraid that some of us, or our guests, might stumble on to one in the dark and that the skunk would shoot first."

—BRICE TOOLE, Missoula, Montana

Reply, by Mr. Paul M. Fink:—If ever a man stood in urgent need of help it is yourself, yet I fear that I am not able to suggest to you a sure, safe and certain, wholly accident-proof means of ridding yourself of your deservedly unwelcome visitors. Nor can I cite you with certainty to any other of the Ask Adventure staff.

One trapper I have consulted says that his method of killing his catch is to shoot the skunk in the head with a .22, and that never yet has one of his victims unlimbered its heavy artillery, either in the trap or when shot. Yet who knows but that the very next one might be the exception, and in your case, to be sure, you wish no exception.

Another authority says to shoot through the spine, in the small of the back, this paralyzing the animal so that it can not secure revenge. Both these methods require a sure and certain shot to secure the desired result.

You might try one of the rat poisons containing phosphorus—the kind that is advertised to make the animal die outside the house—using a chicken head or meat as the bait. This poison would send the skunk in search of water, and to me seems a reasonably sure bet. Strychnine would be deadly enough, but in the convulsions it produces the creature might, involuntarily, spill the beans.

I believe I would suggest trying the rat poison and, in the event that failed, secure the services of a crack marksman. But remember, I offer no guarantees that accidents will not happen, and just one accident would be just too bad. Have you ever heard the observation of the Dutchman who mistook a skunk for a cat, and in a misguided moment attempted to stroke the kitty? "Ach, a t'ousand men could haf schmelled dot cat at vunce!"

Shirt

HOW shrinking neckbands led to the adoption of the Marine scarf; and how difficult it is to find a perfect shirt in civil life.

Request:—"Please tell me the name of the cloth the 'old issue' shirts were made of in the Marine Corps.

I had two of them back in '18. You know the kind I mean. Some kind of woolen flannel that could be pressed and would hold a crease and look good a long time. I want to get some of the cloth and have a few shirts made."

—J. E. EIDSON, Montgomery, Alabama

Reply, by Capt. F. W. Hopkins:—I infer that you do not mean the winter field (green) flannel shirt that had limited issue before the war, but to the "old issue" khaki colored flannel shirt, very close woven and soft, that when washed faded to a creamy yellow color.

Referring to old Marine Corps price lists of clothing, none shows any name other than "shirts flannel" and "shirts cotton" except when "shirts, chambray" were issued—the very light weight cotton shirt (I still have two). I doubt that there was any name for this material you ask about. I still have one of them, pretty ragged now. It was simply a material furnished by some contractor to conform to the specifications of the QM Dept. and might have been referred to as "Contract of 1914" or "Contract of 1917" or whatever.

I know that by 1919 it was getting scarce and was followed by a vile horse blanket material that shrank, changed shade variously, and itched—and that gave place to a better material very shortly, not as good as the old stuff but looking very much like it except in the way the neckbands shrank. It was this feature that caused W. T. Hoadley, then major, among others, to suggest the adoption of the present scarf. The shirting material for flannel shirts now used by the QM, while not the same as the material you refer to, is excellent. Uniform regulations, 1912 and 1917, do not specify any particular material except wool.

MCO No. 27, 4 Sept., 1930 (for 1931) lists

(Price list of clothing, etc.): Shirts, flannel—4.18; Shirts, cotton—1.35; Shirting, Service, Summer, 8½ ounce, 54 inch—per yard—1.55.

To these prices must be added 10 per cent. plus carriage charges. The QM can not sell to you, however, but believe they can if you are in the USMCR. Why not join the reserve, Class VI, anyway? There is no obligation to go to camp—and no pay. But you would still "belong."

You might write the Depot Quartermaster, 1100 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pa., but I doubt if they can tell you where that material you remember can be procured. The present flannel in use is now considered the best in regard to fastness of color, material, etc., we have ever had. For a nice light shirt, the cotton shirt has them all beat. It is a fast color khaki material similar in weave to "Oxford cloth." I have a number, tailored to measure by the QM. The QM may be able to advise you where you can procure the cloth commercially.

Master's Papers

WORKING up from A.B. to skipper.

Request:—"Would you please tell me how many years it requires to get your master's papers? Is there much of a chance for a fellow to work himself up from A.B. to master nowadays?"

—R. HAEBNER, Clinton, Iowa

Reply, by Lt. Harry E. Rieseberg:—To obtain a chief mate's certificate one must have a good working knowledge of celestial and terrestial navigation, stowage of cargo, signaling between ships, the United States laws relating to shipping and a thorough knowledge of seamanship. The applicant must be twenty-one years of age, of good character and must be free from color blindness or bad hearing. He must also have been to sea at least three years and six months.

The qualifications for second and third mate are the same as for chief mate, except the age is nineteen and sea experience is two years.

As to working up from and A.B. to master, one has a very good chance these days, provided, of course, he is qualified. To obtain a master's license, one must go through the grades of 3rd, 2nd, and chief mate, and the present rules require at least one year's service in each capacity.

Bloodhounds

SELDOM bring down the creature whose trail they're following.

Request:—"I would like to know if it is true that bloodhounds only try to bring down a creature if it is fleeing them.

If that is true, does it pertain only to animals which are being pursued, or to men as well?"

—JOSEPH DANGOIA, Astoria, Long Island

Reply, by Mr. John B. Thompson:—The general conception of the work of bloodhounds is at the least very fanciful. They are merely used to follow trail, and as a rule do not bring down the creature—animal or man—which they are following, since their speed is so slow everything precludes this.

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They will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

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2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. **DO NOT** send questions to this magazine.

3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.

4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

A complete list of the "Ask Adventure" experts appears in the issue of the fifteenth of each month

THE TRAIL AHEAD—THE NEXT ISSUE OF *ADVENTURE*, OCTOBER 15th

FULL MOON TIDE

Beginning an amazing novel of the Cannibal Islands of the South Seas, by the author of "Privateers, Pearls and Tears"....

CAPTAIN RAABE

And These Other Fine Stories

THE STRONG HAND ABOVE, a novelette of buccaneer days, by H. BEDFORD-JONES; OBEDIENT SERVANTS, a story of the Western Front, by J. D. NEWSOM; STRICTLY LEGAL, a story of the cattle trails, by WILLIAM CORCORAN; THE GOVERNOR'S SECRETARY, a story of the British Secret Service in Burma, by S. B. H. HURST; A MAN OF SENTIMENT, a story of the Slave Coast, by ROBERT SIMPSON; UP TO THE SKY IN SHIPS, a story of the air mail, by ANDREW A. CAFFREY; A HUNTER POSES, a story of the Mississippi Bottoms, by RAYMOND S. SPEARS; and the conclusion of GUEST OF HONOR, a two-part story of the French Foreign Legion, by GEORGES SURDEZ.

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Don't Rasp Your Throat With Harsh Irritants

"Reach for a LUCKY instead"

Eve started it and the daughters of Eve inherited it. Eve gave Adam the apple, and it seems that Adam must have passed it on. For every man and every woman has an Adam's Apple. It is your larynx—your voice box—containing your vocal chords—Don't rasp your throat with harsh irritants—Reach for a LUCKY instead—Be careful in your choice of cigarettes.

Remember, LUCKY STRIKE is the only cigarette in America that through its exclusive "TOASTING" Process expels certain harsh irritants present in all raw tobaccos. These expelled irritants are sold to manufacturers of chemical compounds. They are not present in your LUCKY STRIKE. And so we say "Consider your Adam's Apple."

TUNE IN—*The Lucky Strike Dance Orchestra, every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evening over N. B. C. networks.*

"It's toasted"

Including the use of Ultra Violet Rays

Sunshine Mellows—Heat Purifies

Your Throat Protection—against irritation—against cough

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